

**Philemon and Onesimus**

Passages: Phm; Jas 2:26; Mt 25:37–40; 18:21–22; Rom 5:8; Eph 4:32; 1 Tim 1:15; Phil 4:13; 2 Tim 2:21

*Memory Verse*

“That the sharing of your faith may become effective by the acknowledgment of every good thing which is in you in Christ Jesus.” (Philemon 1:6)

<b>Knowledge of God’s Will [God’s Word]</b>	<b>Knowledge of God [God’s Divine Nature]</b>	<b>Good Work [Behavior]</b>
1. God desires for us to share our faith through loving others. 2. God seeks sanctified vessels that can be useful for Him.	1. God is love. 2. God is our strength.	1. Recognize the least in church and learn to care for them. 2. Confront our wrongs by first repenting and then changing ourselves.

*Overview*

**Events and Spiritual Teachings**

**A. Philemon: A Loving Master**

1. Love the least of these  
**Life Application:** Do you love the least of your brothers and sisters?
2. Do it for Christ  
**Life Application:** Why do we serve and love Christ?
3. The power of forgiveness  
**Life Application:** Forgiveness is a fruit of our effective faith

**B. Onesimus: A Returning Servant**

1. Confront our mistakes and be transformed  
**Life Application:** Change requires the strength of our Lord

**Memory Verse**

**Conclusion:** Willingly be transformed by the truth to have an effective faith and let the knowledge that we do it all for Christ be our motivation and strength.

## *Spiritual Teachings and Life Application*

---

The New Testament contains thirteen letters written by Paul. While the majority of letters are apologetics against heretical teachings, discussions of church matters, or explanations of the gospel of truth, the Epistle to Philemon is a personal letter written to a friend.

Apostle Paul wrote the letter to Philemon around A.D. 64 while he was in prison (Phm 1:10). Its contents revolve around Paul's request to Philemon for forgiveness and acceptance on the behalf of Onesimus. Through our study of Philemon, Onesimus, and their master-servant relationship, we can reexamine our responsibilities as a Christian regarding our love for others.

### **A. Philemon: A Loving Master**

From the letter, we know that Philemon was a fellow worker in Christ, a wealthy resident of Colosse who came to believe in the gospel under Paul's guidance (Phm 1:19). Though the Bible does not specify Apphia and Archippus' relation to Philemon, some historians believe Apphia to be his wife and Archippus to be his son (v. 2). All three were believers and zealous workers for Christ.

It is evident from the letter that Paul felt joy and comfort in Philemon's faith and love (Phm 1:7). Paul mentioned that Philemon even offered his house for church services (v. 2), often receiving other members with love and helping those in need (v. 7).

In verse 6, Paul encourages Philemon "that the sharing of [his] faith may become effective." What does "effective" mean? The original Greek word means to be active and powerful. Simply knowing our Lord Jesus Christ does not make our faith effective or fruitful. "For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also" (Jas 2:26). Unless we constantly work, grow, and mature in our faith, our faith can easily fall flat and become ineffective.

So how can our faith become effective? "By the acknowledgment of every good thing which is in you in Christ Jesus" (Phm 1:6). What does this mean? It means that our faith can become effective when others see the good that we do for the sake of Christ Jesus. Let us examine the wonderful attributes that Philemon exhibited that allowed his faith to become effective.

#### **1. Love the least of these**

*Then the righteous will answer Him, saying, "Lord, when did we see You hungry and feed You, or thirsty and give You drink? When did we see You a stranger and take You in, or naked and clothe You? Or when did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You?" And the King will answer and say to them, "Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me."*

(Matthew 25:37–40)

In the parable of the sheep and the goats recorded in Matthew, chapter 25, Jesus Christ reminds us that we show love to the Lord when we show love to those around us who are in need. Our expression of love to God is not only limited to doing holy work at church; we must also show care and acceptance to our brothers and sisters in Christ. Paul's desire was for Philemon to "receive [Onesimus] forever, no longer as a slave but more than a slave—a beloved brother" (Phm 1:15–16). Showing love is not only loving the lovable, but also the "unprofitable," which means loving those who can provide nothing in return. We need to learn to receive the unprofitable, for they may seem insignificant, but in truth they are our brethren in Christ.

In Philemon's eyes, Onesimus was nothing more than a runaway slave. However, after his conversion in Christ, Onesimus was no longer an unprofitable slave, but a dear brother in Christ. Desiring to mend the relationship, Paul encouraged Onesimus to deliver the letter himself and asked Philemon to exercise his love by caring for the needs and weaknesses of others.

**Life Application: Do you love the least of your brothers and sisters?**

Do we know who are "the least of these" among our brothers and sisters at church? Those in need may be brothers and sisters whom you may not know well, or who may be much older or younger than you. Often, they are unable to repay your love, but we should not expect repayment for our care. We should show love to them because we see that there is a need, and because we see room to practice the love of Christ.

Oftentimes, it does not take much to show love. A pat on the shoulder, asking about someone's week, an offering of prayer for someone in stress, or even a shared plate of food can be enough to show our love for each other at church. This is servitude that we are all capable of. Do you act when you see the needs of others?

**2. Do it for Christ**

*"Therefore, though I might be very bold in Christ to command you what is fitting, yet for love's sake I rather appeal to you [...] that your good deed might not be by compulsion, as it were, but voluntary."*

(Philemon 1:8–9, 14)

In his letter to Philemon, Paul encouraged Philemon to do the right thing not out of duty or by force, but willingly out of his love for Christ. Just as Paul imitated Christ and encouraged Philemon to follow him, we too should do the same. While Jesus Christ was on the earth, He told His followers that everything He did, He did for God. In John 17:4, in the prayer before His crucifixion, Jesus Christ said, "I have glorified You on the earth. I have finished the work which You have given Me to do." Our actions should be for the sake of God's purpose, willingly and out of our love for Him.

When we do all things for Christ, we and others will witness fruitful results. "For we have great joy and consolation in your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed by you, brother" (Phm 1:7). Paul assured Philemon of the joy and consolation they received through his love. Likewise, through the outward expression of our love, our brethren will receive comfort and joy because they will feel the sincerity of our love, born from our true faith in Christ.

**Life Application: Why do we serve and love Christ?**

Have you ever been assigned holy work that you view as a chore or a time killer, instead of as a way to serve God with joy? Why? Is it because you are not capable? Is it because you do not want to do it? The reality is simple: we find no joy in this holy work because we are not doing the work willingly. So, what is the difference between doing a work willingly and unwillingly? The difference is a matter of the heart.

Why do we serve and love Christ? Because we have all been created by God and made for a purpose. The purpose, as Jesus Christ prayed, is to glorify the Father. Today, all our gifts and possessions have been given to us through God's love; therefore, we should use our skills to

glorify Him in return. But how do we glorify Him? We glorify God when others witness the power of God's love working through us. However, in order to achieve that, we must first work on our interpersonal relationships.

### 3. The power of forgiveness

*"The Peter came to Him and said, 'Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? Up to seven times?' Jesus said to him, 'I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven.'"*

(Matthew 18:21–22)

Why was it important for Paul to encourage Philemon to forgive Onesimus? Why do we also need to forgive? The central message of the cross is the teaching of forgiveness. It is the greatest manifestation of Christ's love for us. Paul wrote, "But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom 5:8), and, "be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God in Christ forgave you" (Eph 4:32). To forgive others, we must first humble ourselves, understand the love that Christ has shown us, and reflect upon our relationship with Christ. When we find ourselves unable to forgive, we need to reexamine our faith in these three aspects.

Jesus Christ clearly taught that we must forgive others because God first forgave us. However, this is easier said than done. When others have hurt us, intentionally or not, we feel pain. Many times, it is far easier to ignore the person than to forgive them. What does it mean to forgive? In the Bible, the original Greek word for forgiveness literally means "to let go" (e.g., when a person does not demand payment for a debt). Thus, we forgive others when we not only renounce any claim for compensation for the hurt or loss we have suffered, but also let go of any resentment towards them.

#### **Life Application: Forgiveness is a fruit of our effective faith**

Forgiveness not only brings peace, but also joy. If we live in resentment and anger every day, how can we live happily? Once, there was a sister that had difficulty forgiving another sister. Over time, the resentment inside her grew. She did not think it to be anything serious in the beginning, but eventually she realized that she needed to forgive because the resentment had formed a wall in her prayers. Each time she knelt down to pray, spiritually she could feel that her prayers were not reaching God due to the immense wall standing between her and God. Not only that, no matter what she did, she was unhappy and easily angered by the little things (e.g., someone cutting in line).

One day, in her prayer, she asked God to help her forgive the person. The burden had become too heavy to bear, and she was unable to forgive solely by her own strength. In that prayer, the sister felt as if God had lifted something heavy from her heart and thrown it into a lake in front of her. After the prayer, the sister felt a lightness in her heart, and as she tried to recall what the other sister had done to her, she could no longer remember. The anger inside her had been replaced with joy.

Love is powerful, and through forgiveness, we allow others to see the strength of Christ's teaching—the strength to overcome pain, to forego resentment, and to accept differences.

Though this love seems difficult to achieve, we can definitely learn to love this way through receiving strength from above, as an effective faith will bear the fruit of forgiveness.

## **B. Onesimus: A Returning Servant**

The name Onesimus means “profitable, useful.” A resident of Colosse (Col 4:9), he served as a slave of Philemon’s (Phm 1:16). After incurring some losses for Philemon, he ran away to Rome, where he met Paul and was converted.

In Roman times, slaves were seen as property, and their masters could buy and sell them as they pleased. According to Roman law, the master had the right to punish a runaway slave severely; imprisonment, whipping, or even execution was a common solution.

Under Paul’s encouragement, Onesimus returned to Philemon, along with a letter written by Paul to Philemon. In it, Paul beseeched Philemon to receive Onesimus, his slave, as a “faithful and beloved brother” (Col 4:9). Paul even offered to pay Philemon any debt that Onesimus had incurred, and to bear the wrong Onesimus had done him (Phm 1:18).

Who can claim to have never made any mistakes in the past? Who can claim to have never wronged anyone? Like Onesimus, we may have left others with a bad impression of us due to mistakes we made. Over time, this bad impression unknowingly becomes a hindrance, preventing others from befriending us, or preventing us from serving in church. However, Paul assured Philemon that Onesimus, who had once been unprofitable, was now profitable to both Philemon and him (Phm 1:11). What caused this transformation? How can we learn from Onesimus to overcome our past and transform from a slave into a beloved brother in Christ?

### **1. Confront our mistakes and be transformed**

Onesimus was once a slave, a sinner who ran away from his responsibilities and caused his master to suffer loss. However, since he came to know Christ, the gospel of Christ transformed him entirely. Now, he faced his difficulties instead of fleeing from them, and he also stayed next to Paul willingly for the sake of the gospel. He became a close coworker of Paul, who viewed him as a son and a caring family member in Christ.

Before becoming a great worker for God, Paul went through a similar experience. In 1 Timothy 1:15, Paul proclaimed, “This is a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief.” Also an “unprofitable” man once upon a time, Paul referred to himself as the chief of sinners. Yet through the grace of Jesus Christ and the renewal of the truth, he transformed from persecutor into a greatly profitable vessel of God.

To be a profitable man in Christ, we must forego our sinful ways and habits. The first step is acknowledgment. We must first recognize and admit our sins. Do you know what is keeping you from being a profitable worker? Is it your procrastination? Pride? Addiction? Timidity? A bad attitude or a temper? Just as when we are ill, in order to recover we must first recognize that we are sick and in need of a doctor.

After witnessing Onesimus’ transformation in Christ, Paul encouraged him to return to Philemon and confront his past faults. However, Onesimus still felt fear due to his inability to repay his debts. In order to strengthen him, Paul wrote a letter as a guarantee and to reassure Philemon

of Onesimus' transformation. Confronting and repenting of our sins are the initial steps. However, while God can search our hearts, man cannot. Therefore, we must take action to prove to others and to ourselves that we truly have transformed.

### **Life Application**

Owning up to our mistakes requires a great deal of courage. Changing our old ways requires a strong determination. But just a strong determination is not enough. Just as Paul's letter strengthened Onesimus' decision to return, so is the promise of our Lord our strength. "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me" (Phil 4:13). God will strengthen us in our fear and weakness. As long as we are willing to repent, we will be a vessel useful for the Lord. "Therefore, if anyone cleanses himself from the latter, he will be a vessel for honor, sanctified and useful for the Master, prepared for every good work" (2 Tim 2:21).

### *Check for Understanding*

---

- 1. Who was Philemon?** Philemon was a wealthy Colossian. Paul's beloved friend and fellow worker, he often showed love toward church members and even offered his home for church services.
- 2. What is an effective faith?** An effective faith is one that allows others to see the good that we can do for the sake of Christ Jesus.
- 3. Who was Onesimus? What is the meaning of his name?** Onesimus used to be Philemon's household slave, but he caused his master to suffer loss, so he fled to Rome. In Rome, he met Paul and converted to Christ, becoming a faithful worker. The name Onesimus means "profitable, useful."
- 4. What was the purpose of Paul's letter to Philemon?** After Onesimus' conversion, Paul encouraged him to return to Philemon to ask for forgiveness. Knowing Onesimus' fear and worries, Paul wrote the letter for Onesimus to bring, the contents of which asked Philemon for acceptance and forgiveness.
- 5. How did Onesimus transform from being unprofitable to profitable?** Through the grace of God, he accepted the gospel and became a faithful worker. He showed Paul that he was a brother in Christ who was worthy of God's grace, not an irresponsible runaway slave. Seeing his transformation, Paul reassured Philemon that Onesimus was no longer an unprofitable slave but a profitable, useful brother in Christ.

### *Memory Verse*

---

"That the sharing of your faith may become effective by the acknowledgment of every good thing which is in you in Christ Jesus." (Philemon 1:6)

### **Meaning**

After receiving the gospel, Philemon experienced wonderful changes and witnessed the love of God in his life. Thus, Paul prayed for Philemon, desiring that his faith could be shared effectively by acknowledging the good that he could do for Christ. Through Philemon, others could see that all good deeds were done for the sake of the Lord Jesus Christ. In doing good for the sake of Jesus Christ, the faith that he shared was effective, fruitful, and living.

### *Conclusion*

---

Just as love is the key message of the cross, it is also the mark of a Christian. We have all experienced the love and forgiveness of our Lord Jesus Christ, but for our faith to grow, we cannot simply remain on the receiving end—we must learn to give as well. As we share our faith, which is the love we have

received from our Lord Jesus Christ, we can improve a relationship, restore what is broken, and renew what appears to be dead. This is the power of the gospel that we believe and preach.

Not only will the love of Christ bring change in others, but it will also transform us into profitable workers for the kingdom of God. "Having confidence in your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say" (Phm 1:21). May we all be able to carry out the love of Christ, so that we may foster beautiful relationships with our brethren and transform into faithful and effective vessels for God.

## Lesson 12 Homework Assignment Answer Key

1. When will our faith become effective, according to the memory verse?  
*When others can see the good deeds that we do for the sake of our Lord. In doing good for the sake of Jesus Christ, our faith can become effective, fruitful, and living.*
2. What does it mean to do God's work willingly?  
*It means that all of our actions should be for the sake of God's purpose out of our love for Him, not out of a sense of duty or responsibility, or by force.*
3. What three things are necessary to learn how to forgive others?  
*First, we must humble ourselves, second, understand the love that Christ has shown us, and third, reflect upon our relationship with Christ.*
4. In what way was Onesimus transformed?  
*He was once a slave, a sinner who ran away from his responsibilities and caused his master to suffer loss. Once he came to know Christ, he transformed into someone who faced his difficulties instead of fleeing from them, and he also became a close coworker of Paul, viewed by him as a son and brother in Christ.*
5. Read James 2:26. Is your faith "without works"? What habits can you change to make your faith effective and profitable?  
*Personal answers.*
6. Have you shown love to your brothers and sisters today? If so, describe how, and if not, describe how you plan to after this lesson.  
*Personal answers.*