

**Week 50**  
**“Kingdom Leaders Reflect Christlikeness”**  
**Philemon 1-25**  
**December 14/15**

**Summary & Goal**

Paul’s letter to Philemon (fi-LEE-mon) depicts membership in God’s Kingdom on a practical and personal level. The letter reveals that Christians, regardless of their past or social position, have been transformed into a loving spiritual family under Jesus Christ with a mission to make Christ known through word and deed. The Christian family rule is to serve one another in extraordinary ways. Philemon also demonstrates how authority should be exercised within the spiritual family.

***By the end of this session, students should be convinced that membership in God’s Kingdom comes with a growing desire to serve other Christians***—and that we are refreshed when we fulfill that desire! A Christian never graduates from the school of service because there is no limit to the loving service of Christ toward believers.

**Main Passages**

Philemon 1:17-18: **“If then you count me as a partner, receive him as you would me. But if he has wronged you or owes you anything, put that on my account.”**

**Session Outline**

1. Refreshing the Family as Host (1:1-7)
2. Refreshing the Family Through Hospitality (1:8-22)
3. Receiving Refreshment From Other Family Members (1:23-25)

**Session in a Sentence**

As God’s people grow more like Jesus, they will refresh one another through extraordinary service.

**Kingdom Connection**

Philemon illustrates the way “power” works in God’s Kingdom—not coercively but willingly. This power flows out from the God-Man Jesus Christ, who emptied Himself, served, suffered, died, resurrected and was exalted (Phillipians 2:6-11) so that He could pour out gifts on His church (Ephesians 4:8). God’s power working through the Gospel, saves sinners (Romans 1:16), transfers them from darkness into light (Acts 26:8; Colossians 1:13), seals them with the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 1:13), and works to make them live more like Jesus Christ (Romans 8:29).

Because Jesus Christ lives and reigns through believers, they *will* grow more and more like Him. This was always our heavenly King's plan (Ephesians 1:10).

### **Missional Connection**

God's people are on a mission to make God fully known—both by their words and their deeds. Philemon illustrates how a person's social status or past record does not hinder them from membership in the Kingdom of God; however, spreading the Gospel could cost believers their earthly freedom or comfort.

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**INTRODUCTION:**

In 1888, an Atlanta businessman named Asa Candler paid a local pharmacist around \$2,700 for the recipe and rights to a fizzy drink that people said was “refreshing.” Candler took his refreshing drink to soda fountains around the city and it started to catch on. By 1899, Candler’s refreshing drink was so popular that some Chattanooga businessmen asked if they could bottle it. Candler did not think much of the idea and charged the Chattanooga businessmen \$1 for the rights to bottle his refreshment. Some say he never even collected the dollar.

But bottled refreshment made Candler, the Chattanooga businessmen, and many others a lot of dollars. Coca-Cola—as they called it—turned out to be a form of refreshment that would unite people around the world from all walks of life. In fact, their marketing strategy was always to use their product to bring people together. In the 1970’s they had the hilltop commercial where people representing all walks of life and ethnicities came together to “teach the world to sing.” Later they adopted the phrase, “share a coke and a smile,” then “share a coke and a song.” No matter the slogan, they represented that the refreshment of their product was to be shared with others to unite them.

It may have seemed like a small thing to Candler, but those little bottles of refreshment have brought a lot of people together.

Miriam-Webster defines “refresh” in this way: to renew strength, restore, revive.

Today we are going to learn about Christian refreshment, and we are going to do it by reading someone else’s mail.

**CONTEXT:**

Philemon is Paul’s shortest letter in Scripture and is **addressed to an individual church member who is *not* a pastor.**

**Philemon** was a Colossian Christian who hosted the church in his house as church buildings were not a thing until the 300AD. We know that he was a **wealthy man** because he 1) had a big enough house to host church gatherings, and 2) he owned at least one slave, named **Onesimus** (on-NESS-sim-us).

Philemon was not the pastor-teacher of the church. That calling fell to a man named **Archippus** (ark-HIP-us), who Paul mentions in 1:2, and exhorts at the end of his letter to the Colossians (Col 4:17). Philemon was probably married to **Apphia** (ap-FEE-uh), who is also named in the letter’s introduction (1:2).

Since Philemon was a Colossian the ideas Paul shares in **Colossians can help us understand** the letter to Philemon. As we read Philemon’s mail, we should remember Paul’s exhortations to the Colossian church:

**Colossians 3: 8** *But now you yourselves are to put off all these: anger, wrath, malice, blasphemy, filthy language out of your mouth. <sup>9</sup> Do not lie to one another, since you have put off the old man with his deeds, <sup>10</sup> and have put on the new man who is renewed in knowledge according to the image of Him who created him, <sup>11</sup> where there is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcised nor uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave nor free, but Christ is all and in all. <sup>12</sup> Therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, put on tender mercies, kindness, humility, meekness, longsuffering; <sup>13</sup> bearing with one another, and forgiving one another, if anyone has a complaint against another; even as Christ forgave you, so you also must do. (Chronological Bible, December 9, pp. 1534-1535)*

With those ideas in the background, Philemon's mail is going to illustrate, very practically, what it looks like for one of God's elect, holy, beloved, and forgiven children to "put on" kindness, humility, meekness, and forgiveness toward another in Christ. It illustrates how the kingdom of Jesus Christ includes people from every ethnic group, background, and social status imaginable. It shows us that in Christ even the most disordered relationships can experience growth, fellowship, and refreshment.

### **1. Refreshing The Family As Host:**

**Philemon 1:1** *Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, To Philemon our beloved friend and fellow laborer, <sup>2</sup> to the beloved Apphia, Archippus our fellow soldier, and to the church in your house: <sup>3</sup> Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. <sup>4</sup> I thank my God, making mention of you always in my prayers, <sup>5</sup> hearing of your love and faith which you have toward the Lord Jesus and toward all the saints, <sup>6</sup> that the sharing of your faith may become effective by the acknowledgment of every good thing which is in you in Christ Jesus. <sup>7</sup> For we have great joy and consolation in your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed by you, brother. (Chronological Bible, December 10, p. 1536)*

Notice first this is not just a letter between two people. It is a family letter, from two brothers in Christ, (Paul and his assistant Timothy), to their fellow brother in Christ, (Philemon), along with members of his "spiritual household"—most likely his wife and his pastor.

Paul is building accountability in the situation, by mentioning more than one person to read the letters and in mentioning Timothy.

*APPLY:* Do we value this kind of accountability? Are we willing to open our homes and our hearts so that other Christians can see what we care most about? Philemon is

certainly opening his home, but he may not be opening his heart to other believers. Paul seems to be suggesting that a Christian leader like Philemon can entrust himself to other members of his spiritual family—starting with his wife and his pastor. So, if you do not have people keeping you accountable, take some advice from Paul and enlist someone to start asking questions like “how are you using your gifts?” “how you are you spending your time and your money?” You will never grow much without accountability.

Second, before Paul encourages Philemon to take this step of accountable growth, he does a little bragging on him, specifically bragging on what Jesus has done in him. Paul thanks God for Philemon because of his reputation for love and faith in Jesus (v.5). He talks about Philemon’s love for other believers, and how that love is refreshing the hearts of other Christians (v.7).

In these verses, Paul is doing what he does in the first half of all his letters. He is bragging on the work of Jesus. If you have read Paul’s letters over the past month in our Chronological Bible, you know that Paul will only boast about one thing: the work of Jesus Christ.

*APPLY:* Are we bragging only on what Jesus Christ has done in one another’s lives? He is our active, living Lord, so there should be an ongoing stream of refreshing activity flowing out of us from Him. Look for it in others. Point it out. Be a cheerleader for God’s gracious work in other people’s lives!

Third, in the middle of Paul’s boast about Jesus’ work in Philemon’s life, he inserts a little prayer that points toward the ultimate purpose of this letter. It’s the hardest verse in Philemon to understand.

*SIDE NOTE:* When you run into a hard passage in Scripture—whether because it is hard to interpret, hard to apply, or maybe just hard to believe, do you stop and chew on it, pray over it, and seek to understand and apply it by faith? Or do you just move along? Very often it is the hardest passages that yield the greatest fruit as we learn and live out Scripture. Consider all the technology, knowledge, and economic growth that resulted from someone deciding to drill for oil underneath the ocean floor! The Bible is the result of an infinite mind, and it is an infinite well of life-giving truth. Your efforts to learn it and apply it will never disappoint you! Martin Luther set out to understand what the “righteousness of God” means in Romans and God used his efforts to reform the entire church in the 1500s!

Look at verse 6 again, “*that the sharing of your faith may become effective by the acknowledgment of every good thing which is in you in Christ Jesus.*” (NKJV)

Other translations can assist our understanding:

“*I pray that your participation in the faith may become effective through knowing every good thing that is in us for the glory of Christ.*” (CSB)

“*I pray that the faith you share with us might deepen your understanding of every blessing that belongs to you in Christ.*” (NET)

“*and I pray that the fellowship of your faith may become effective through the knowledge of every good thing which is in you for Christ’s sake.*” (NASB)

Nowadays, when we talk about “faith sharing” we typically mean something to do with spreading the gospel among non-Christians. But when Paul uses this term, he means something more like holding “shares” in a company. “Sharing” in verse six, is the same word translated “fellowship” in other places in Scripture (*koinonia*). The point is that every believer has a “share” in Christ, in the faith Christ gives, and in the church, Christ gave us. Every blood-bought child of God has “shares” in this faith—a “participation” that was pre-prepared for us by God (Eph 2:10).

Here in verse six, Paul is praying that Philemon will gain knowledge and that knowledge will increase his share in the faith. To be more specific, Paul is suggesting that Philemon needs to discover a new way that Christ is going to work through him—so that he can get more of Jesus and be more refreshing to his fellow believers. In the next part of the letter Paul encourages him to grow into that role.

*APPLY:* Do you know your share in the body of Christ? If so, do you limit yourself to just a few certain things? You give a certain percentage of your income, you serve in a certain position, you show up a certain number of Sundays, change certain behaviors, and—congratulations—you are *acting* like a Christian.

But our “part” in Christ is not the part of an actor, the Kingdom of God is not a stage play! We are shareholders in the most consequential endeavor in the history of humankind—the Church of the Lord Jesus Christ. Christ is a living Lord, and He appoints our times, seasons, and our service. When we became Christians, we inherited a dynamic portfolio of spiritual capital, spiritual gifts, and spiritual relationships that will carry us all the way to a staggering heavenly reward. The longer we live as Christians, the more we should be investing in those spiritual things because they are going to yield incredible fruit for the glory of Jesus, and incredible refreshment for the people of God. Keep praying for God to reveal to you more ways to serve and refresh others in the body of Christ.

Paul’s words of prayer are there to help Philemon see that his current service as host is just the beginning of what Christ can do through him to refresh other believers and bring glory to Jesus.

But God’s Kingdom does not exist in just words—there must be power (1 Cor 4:20). The next part of Paul’s letter is going to reveal the shocking power of Jesus to transform our relationships.

## **2. Refreshing the Family Through Hospitality:**

**Philemon 8** *Therefore, though I might be very bold in Christ to command you what is fitting, <sup>9</sup> yet for love’s sake I rather appeal to you—being such a one as Paul, the aged, and now also a prisoner of Jesus Christ—<sup>10</sup> I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, whom I have begotten while in my chains, <sup>11</sup> who once was unprofitable to you, but now is profitable to you and to me. <sup>12</sup> I am sending him back. You therefore receive him, that is, my own heart, <sup>13</sup> whom I wished to keep with me, that on your behalf he might minister to me in my chains for the gospel. <sup>14</sup> But without your consent I wanted to do nothing, that*

*your good deed might not be by compulsion, as it were, but voluntary.* <sup>15</sup> *For perhaps he departed for a while for this purpose, that you might receive him forever,* <sup>16</sup> *no longer as a slave but more than a slave—a beloved brother, especially to me but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord.*

<sup>17</sup> *If then you count me as a partner, receive him as you would me.* <sup>18</sup> *But if he has wronged you or owes anything, put that on my account.* <sup>19</sup> *I, Paul, am writing with my own hand. I will repay—not to mention to you that you owe me even your own self besides.* <sup>20</sup> *Yes, brother, let me have joy from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in the Lord.* <sup>21</sup> *Having confidence in your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say.* <sup>22</sup> *But, meanwhile, also prepare a guest room for me, for I trust that through your prayers I shall be granted to you. (Chronological Bible, December 10, p. 1536)*

We have seen Paul brag on what Christ accomplished through Philemon as he became a host to the church. But Paul indicates that Christ has more business to do in Philemon's life, and he is about to tell Philemon exactly what that is. Paul does not just want him to be a host. He wants him to embody the hospitality of Jesus. He wants him to take back Onesimus.

Who is Onesimus? As we saw in verse 16, Onesimus was Philemon's slave. But more importantly, he is now a Christian. Paul calls Onesimus a "beloved brother" in both this letter and in Colossians (4:9). He even calls him his "son" in verse 10, and his "own heart" in verse 12. Apparently, Paul had great affection for this Christian brother!

There are several proposals about how Onesimus ended up with Paul. Some say he ran away from Philemon. Others say Philemon sent Onesimus to check on Paul in prison.<sup>1</sup> We will never know why Philemon and Onesimus were parted, but we know they had an incredibly disordered relationship because of slavery.

The Bible never promotes or advocates slavery. God created humans in His image, and as fellow-image bearers, it is fundamentally evil for one human to own another as property. So, the relationship between a slave and master is inherently disordered. This is why Paul lists "enslavers" among the "lawless," "disobedient," "ungodly," and "sinners" in his first letter to Timothy. So even though we do not know the whole back story between Philemon and Onesimus, we know their relationship was disordered and broken.

As we read the Bible, we need to have separate categories for "descriptive language" and "prescriptive language." Just because something is *described*, does not mean it is *prescribed*. Slavery is *often described* in Scripture because it was—and continues to be—a horrific symptom of life in a fallen world. But slavery is *never prescribed*. Even where the Old Testament law

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<sup>1</sup> Pao, David W., *Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: Colossians and Philemon*, Clint Arnold, ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 343-348.

appears to make allowances for slavery, it must be understood as a grievous concession to the people's hardness of heart (much like divorce in Matthew 19:8). Slavery under another human is always a hardship, and God's greatest work for Israel in the Old Testament is when He emancipated the Israelites from slavery in Egypt! In the New Testament, Jesus, like a new Moses, sets God's people free from slavery to sin and death (Rom 6). Because Jesus frees us from the worst form of slavery, New Testament Christians were less concerned with abolishing human slavery than they were with spreading the Gospel to every human being--slave or free (compare 1 Corinthians 7:20-24).

Another source of disorder between Philemon and Onesimus is that Onesimus had somehow wronged—or been “unprofitable” to—Philemon (v.11, 18). Maybe Onesimus stole from Philemon or injured him—we will never know. With all this disorder in the background, we should note that when Paul met Onesimus, he treated him just like he did every other human being: as a fellow sinner in need of God's grace. Paul shared the Gospel with Onesimus and led him to Christ.

It is easy to miss the shocking nature of what is going on in this letter because Paul is so gentle in his words to Philemon. He is saying that regardless of their different social status, and regardless of how they have wronged one another, Philemon should receive Onesimus *like a brother*. He even takes it a step farther by saying Philemon should receive him like he would receive the apostle Paul himself (v. 17)!

The idea of “receiving” a person in the New Testament means much more than just an open door and a handshake. It means food and lodging and maybe some financial support. This is why Paul tells the Philippians to “receive” Epaphroditus (Phil 2:29), and why John tells one of his churches *not* to receive people who do not teach that Jesus was fully God and fully man (2 John 10).

“Receiving” Onesimus like this was no small thing. It was a major act of humility and social risk for Philemon to embrace Onesimus the way he would embrace Paul. Nevertheless, Paul makes this ask—and he clarifies the spiritual stakes for Philemon in verse 17. He writes: “If then you count me as a *partner*...receive him as you would me.” The word “partner” is that same word Paul used earlier that was translated “faith sharing,” or “partnership.” In other places, it is fellowship (*koinonia*). Paul is basically telling Philemon, “If you are a *Christian*, you will embrace this man just like you would embrace me--your brother and spiritual father.”

“Receiving” Onesimus is the “share” of the Christian life, that Paul so eagerly wants Philemon to embrace. **He wants him to grow up from being someone who hosts the church to someone who embodies the hospitality of Christ.**

But Paul does not put *all* the spiritual heat on Philemon. He bears some of it himself. He writes in verse 18, “*but if he has wronged you or owes anything, put that on my account...I will repay.*” This is Paul assuming the role of a mediator—and he is following the example of Jesus Christ, who took our sins on his account and credited his righteousness to our account (Rom 5). He is reminding Philemon of what Christ accomplished for him when he removed the threat of punishment for sins by dying on the cross. And just to make the point crystal clear, Paul writes this part of the letter “*with his own hand*” (v. 19).

APPLY: When God determined to forgive your sins and my sins, He did not simply declare it from heaven. He took on flesh, lived among us, served, suffered, died, and was resurrected to accomplish it. God wrote that most essential part of history—the story of redemption—“with his own hand.” If you ever doubt God’s forgiveness of your sins, look no farther than the hands of the God-man Jesus Christ, pierced for your transgressions, nailed to a cross, and seen by Thomas and the other disciples with their own eyes. God took up the pen and wrote the story of forgiveness with his own hand. Praise God that He is mighty to save!

Here are two more observations from the heart of the letter:

First, Paul does not *command* Philemon to do this “fitting” and “good deed.” He *encourages* him to do it (v. 8-9). It is hard to imagine a greater spiritual authority than Paul—an apostle of Jesus, and the one to whom Philemon owed his salvation (v. 19). Nevertheless, Paul appeals for Onesimus with gentleness, respect, compassion, and love. He trusts that God’s Spirit will prompt Philemon to receive Onesimus “voluntarily” (v. 14). Paul is so confident in the Spirit’s working that he says in verse 21 that he expects Philemon to do “even more” than he says. This could mean that he expects Philemon to fully emancipate Onesimus, and the history of the church is full of great emancipators who took Paul’s words as a call to action.

APPLY: In the church, where Christians stand on equal footing under Jesus and have the Holy Spirit dwelling inside them—we do not need to trick, cajole, command, or control to make folks do the right thing. We can appeal to the truth, encourage people to do the “good deed,” and trust God’s Spirit to do the rest. Churches may discipline sinful members by *withholding* fellowship (and it is possible that Paul has this in mind with Philemon) but coercion—even to do a good thing—is not the New Testament church way. We believe in the Holy Spirit working in and through believers to grow them in Christ-likeness.

Second, Paul encourages Philemon to receive Onesimus as brother because it will “refresh [his] heart” in the Lord (v. 20). This is the second time Paul uses that word “refresh.” Earlier, he said Philemon’s love and service to the church he hosts were refreshing the hearts of the saints. Through Paul, God is revealing that Christians can refresh one another through serving one another.

APPLY: Life is hard, and our hearts are often burdened by all kinds of bad news, bad health, bad thoughts, or bad feelings. Christians have a secret weapon against the heavy heart: serving one another. When we serve each other in big and small ways, we are like Paul and Philemon, growing more like Christ. We are also refreshing the hearts of the people we serve. Do not miss an opportunity to refresh other Christians by serving them.

### **3. Receiving Refreshment From Other Family Members:**

*Philemon 23-25: Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, greets you, as do Mark, Aristarchus, [ar-ist-ARK-us] Demas [DEY-mus], Luke, my fellow laborers. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Amen.*

In a letter with so much family language and so much family accountability, it is fitting that Paul concludes by mentioning the other spiritual family members co-working for the Gospel (v.1). Just like Philemon, these were imperfect men. Demas would later desert Paul because he was “in

love with the world,” and we do not know if he returned (2 Tim 4:10). Mark had deserted Paul and Barnabas on their first mission trip together, but he later returned. Paul “received” him and forgave him. He went on to write the earliest Gospel, and he died as a missionary in Egypt. Mark became a source of refreshment for untold believers.

This is a great reminder that we are not to live in isolation personally or spiritually. We need one another. We are to be a source of spiritual refreshment to one another, to revive, restore, and reinvigorate in times of challenges. As for Philemon and Onesimus, we do not get the rest of their story, but we certainly get the point!

### **CONCLUSION:**

In the 1800s, Asa Candler had no idea what those little bottles of refreshment would do to the world. He got involved in other business ventures, served a stint as Atlanta mayor, and by 1919 he and his family had sold Coca-Cola to some investors. He made a pretty good profit, but nothing like if he had kept investing in those little bottles of refreshment. He did not see the full potential, and in hindsight sold way too low.

To be a Christian is to hold an infinite treasure in a jar of clay (2 Cor 4:7). We have an incredible amount of refreshment bottled up in there. Do not sell low! Keep investing in spiritual treasures. Keep investing your life in other believers. Through Jesus, we have an international spiritual family of people from all walks of life. Our background, pedigree, education, status--or lack thereof—are not what makes us grow more like Jesus. It is the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ alone that makes us grow, serve, and refresh others. For that we are grateful.