

PHILEMON

verse by verse



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Bible Study Guide

Acknowledgments

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INTRODUCTION TO PHILEMON

Invisible walls divide people into the “ins and outs,” the “haves and have nots,” and an endless assortment of groups, cliques, and castes. Determined by race, skin color, nationality, money, background, education, status, religion, sex, or ability, individuals are judged, categorized, and put in their place. When those social barriers are crossed, usually it is at a great price.

But Jesus broke the barriers that divide men and women from each other and from God. In a male-dominated society, he spoke freely with women (**Matthew 9:18–26; Luke 8:1–3**). In the face of holier-than-thou hypocrites, he dined with sinners (**Matthew 9:10–13**). Ignoring years of prejudice and discrimination, he associated with Samaritans (**John 4:1–42**) and Gentiles (**Luke 7:1–10; 8:26–39**). And he continually sought to bring outcasts and the powerless into his fold: the crippled and lame (**Luke 6:1–11**), the desperately ill (**Matthew 8:1–4; Luke 17:11–19**), the blind (**Luke 18:35–42; Mark 8:22–26; John 9:1–7**), children (**Mark 10:13–16**), swindlers and cheaters (**Mark 11:13–17; Luke 19:1–10**), and the poor (**Mark 3:7–12; Luke 21:1–4**).

Following in the footsteps of the Lord, Paul became the apostle to the Gentiles as he traveled extensively and shared Christ’s message with all types of people. In fact, writing to the Galatians, Paul declared: “There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (**Galatians 3:28**).

Perhaps the greatest example of the barrier-shattering power of the gospel is here in Philemon, where Paul reunites a rich slave-owner and his runaway slave, now both members of God’s family.

PHILEMON

PAUL'S APPRECIATION OF PHILEMON / 1-7

Paul wrote Philemon, along with Ephesians, Philippians, and Colossians, from prison in Rome (**Acts 28:30-31**). Onesimus, a domestic slave, belonged to Philemon, a wealthy man and a member of the church in Colosse. Onesimus had run away from Philemon and had made his way to Rome, where he had met Paul, who apparently had led him to Christ (v. 10). Paul convinced Onesimus that running from his problems wouldn't solve them, and he persuaded Onesimus to return to his master. In Colossians 4:9, Paul regarded Onesimus as a trusted associate. Paul wrote this letter to Philemon to ask him to be reconciled to his runaway slave.

1 “**Paul, a prisoner of Jesus Christ, and Timothy our brother, unto Philemon our dearly beloved, and fellowlabourer,**”

- Paul chose to introduce himself in this letter as a *prisoner of Christ Jesus*. This is the only one of Paul's letters where he used such an introduction. Paul was indeed a prisoner; not only taken captive by Jesus Christ, but also a captive in Rome for preaching the gospel; the Good News of Christ Jesus (**Philippians 1:13**).
- **And Timothy our brother.** Timothy's name is included with Paul's in 2 Corinthians, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon. Timothy was one of Paul's trusted companions; Paul wrote two letters to him (1 and 2 Timothy).

- Timothy visited Paul frequently during his imprisonment (**Colossians 1:1**) and was with Paul in Rome when he wrote this letter. Timothy was not imprisoned with Paul, but he had stayed in Rome to encourage Paul and to help with ministry needs. Timothy had grown up in Lystra, a city in the province of Galatia. Paul and Barnabas had visited Lystra on Paul's first missionary journey (**Acts 14:8–21**). Most likely, Paul had met the young Timothy and his mother, Eunice, and grandmother Lois (**2 Timothy 1:5**), during that visit.
- On Paul's second missionary journey, he and Silas had returned to several cities including Lystra. There Paul met Timothy (**Acts 16:1–3**). Timothy probably had come to believe in Christ through Paul, for Paul later would call him "my true son in the faith" (**1 Timothy 1:2**). Paul and Timothy had developed a special bond, like father and son (**Philippians 2:22**). Timothy became Paul's co-worker in the ministry; traveling with him and sometimes for him.
- **To Philemon our dear friend and fellow worker.** Philemon was a wealthy Greek landowner living in Colosse. He had been converted under Paul's ministry (v. 19), perhaps in Ephesus or some other city where he had met and talked with Paul. During Paul's years of ministry in nearby Ephesus, Philemon had been building up the Colossian church, which would meet in his home (v. 2). Thus Paul considered him not only a *dear friend* but also a *fellow worker* on behalf of the gospel. (Paul also referred to him as "brother" in vv. 7 and 20.) Like most wealthy landowners of ancient times, Philemon owned slaves. Onesimus, the subject of this letter, was one of those slaves.

2 “And to our beloved Apphia, and Archippus our fellowsoldier, and to the church in thy house:”

- Apphia probably was Philemon’s wife or another close relative who helped manage his household; otherwise, she would not have been greeted with Philemon in a letter concerning a domestic matter. At this time, women handled the day-to-day responsibilities of the slaves. Thus, the final decision about Onesimus would have been as much her choice as Philemon’s.
- **To Archippus our fellow soldier.** Archippus may have been Philemon’s son, or perhaps an elder in the Colossian church (at the end of the letter to the Colossians, Paul had given special encouragement to a man named Archippus; **Colossians 4:17**). In either case, Paul included him as a recipient of the letter.
- Paul described Archippus as *our fellow soldier*. Paul often used military metaphors for serving Christ (**Romans 7:23; 2 Corinthians 6:7; 10:3–5; Ephesians 6:10–18; Philippians 2:25; 1 Timothy 1:18; 2 Timothy 2:3–4**). Soldiers must be disciplined, committed, and unified. So, too, believers must lead disciplined lives, stand strongly committed to the faith, and remain unified because they fight the same battle; that of bringing the gospel to an unbelieving and increasingly hostile world. Paul was in chains for preaching the gospel; apparently Archippus was fighting the battle well, as he also worked to spread the gospel.

- **And to the church that meets in your home.** The early churches met in people's homes. Because of sporadic persecutions and the great expense involved, church buildings were not constructed at this time (church buildings were not built until the third century).
- Paul had been writing a letter to the entire Colossian church at this same time. Because of the personal nature of this letter, Paul apparently chose not to include his instructions to Philemon in his general letter to the Colossians. Paul greeted the believers who met in Philemon's home because Paul knew that not only would this group know about the runaway slave, but they would also become Onesimus's "family" upon his return as a new believer. The church would need to understand Paul's request and Philemon's response to it. Then there would be no gossip, and they could immediately and lovingly accept Onesimus into their fellowship.

3 "Grace to you, and peace, from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ."

- Paul used *grace* and *peace* as a standard greeting in all his letters. "Grace is God's undeserved favor; his loving-kindness shown to sinners whereby he saves them and enables them to be filled with the life of Christ. Peace not only refers to the peace that Christ made between sinners and God through His death on the cross. It also refers to peace from God (**Romans 1:7**), as well as the peace of God (**Philippians 4:7**).
- The phrase *God our Father* focuses on the family relationship among all believers as God's children.

- By using the phrase, *Lord Jesus Christ*, Paul was pointing to God the Father and Christ the Lord as co-equal in providing grace and peace.

4 “I thank my God, making mention of thee always in my prayers,”

- With these words, Paul was not only expressing his love for Philemon, but also his God given desire to pray for churches and for individual believers who had specific needs.

5 “Hearing of thy love and faith, which thou hast toward the Lord Jesus, and toward all saints;”

- Philemon had been converted under Paul’s ministry and then had returned to Colosse. Although Paul had never visited Colosse, he had heard (perhaps from Onesimus or Epaphras) about Philemon’s continued faith and love for the believers.
- In the Greek text, the phrase is “I hear of your love and faith which you have to the Lord Jesus and to all the saints.” The Greek word *pistis* can be translated “faith,” “faithfulness,” or “loyalty.” Loyalty may be a more natural meaning for Paul’s usage here. Paul always thanked God for Philemon because of his faith and love that had ministered to many believers in Colosse and, Paul hoped, would continue to be true with Onesimus.

6 “That the communication of thy faith may become effectual by the acknowledging of every good thing which is in you in Christ Jesus.”

- The Greek word *koinonia* is rendered in these verses as communication or “sharing” or “fellowship.” *Koinonia* incorporates the true outworking of Christian love in the body of Christ; fellowship that draws individual believers to belong to one another, willingly rejoicing with those who rejoice and weeping with those who weep (Romans 12:15). Paul prayed that Philemon’s faith would show itself in *koinonia* among the believers. Paul prayed that Philemon would be *active* in this *koinonia*, this fellowship and sharing. Paul would later ask Philemon to welcome Onesimus as if he were Paul, and that Philemon should charge any of Onesimus’s debts to Paul (vv. 17–19). This is true *koinonia*, Christians giving to one another and caring for one another because they belong to one another.
- The great evangelist Paul, the wealthy master Philemon, and the runaway slave Onesimus belonged to one another in the body of Christ because of their faith in him.
- Paul prayed that Philemon would *have a full knowledge/understanding of every good thing we have “in Christ”*. Every “good thing” refers to what God has done for believers in Christ and looks forward to the “good thing” Philemon would do for Onesimus (v. 14). Finally the words “in Christ” explains our position (out of Adam and into Christ) and refers to everything Philemon was, had, and would become.

7 “For we have great joy and consolation in thy love, because the bowels of the saints are refreshed by thee, brother.”

- The love that Philemon showed to all the saints (v. 5) refreshed their hearts and gave Paul joy and encouragement. Philemon probably had lived out his faith among the believers in many ways beyond sharing his home for church meetings. Paul hoped that Philemon's love, which had given others joy, encouragement, and refreshment, would also show itself in his acceptance in dealings with Onesimus.
- Philemon's love *refreshed the hearts of the saints*. The word "refreshed" (*anapepautai*, see also v. 20) is the same word that Jesus used in **Matthew 11:28** to describe the rest ("refreshment") he would give those who came to him.

PAUL'S APPEAL FOR ONESIMUS / 8–25

While in prison, Paul had led Onesimus to the Lord. So he asked Philemon to forgive his runaway slave who had become a Christian and, even going beyond forgiveness, to accept Onesimus as a brother. **Ephesians 4:31–32**

8 "Wherefore, though I might be much bold in Christ to enjoin thee that which is convenient,"

- The word *wherefore/therefore* carries on the thought from verse 7; the love Philemon had shown to the saints ought to be extended to include Onesimus. Such a request would be *bold* indeed; in the Roman Empire, a master had the right to kill a disobedient slave. In any other situation, Onesimus's action of running away would have signed his death warrant. But Onesimus had met Paul, and Paul knew Philemon, so Paul mediated because of their common brotherhood in Christ.

- Paul was Philemon’s friend and spiritual father (v. 19), but Paul was also an elder and an apostle with authority in Christ. Paul could have used his authority and ordered Philemon to deal kindly with his runaway slave. But Paul based his request not on his own authority, but on his friendship/fellowship with Philemon in Christ. Paul would explain to Philemon what he ought to do but would not enforce it, hoping, instead, that Philemon would willingly do the right thing (v. 14).

9 “Yet for love’s sake I rather beseech thee, being such an one as Paul the aged, and now also a prisoner of Jesus Christ.”

- Although Paul certainly had the authority to tell Philemon what to do, he preferred not to use his authority; he wanted Philemon to make the final decision. The love to which Paul referred may have been Paul’s love for Philemon, Paul’s love for Onesimus, Philemon’s well-known love for the believers (vv. 4–5, 7), or the virtue of Christian love in general. In any case, Paul would make his appeal for Onesimus *on the basis of love*.
- Paul’s authority was not to be completely forgotten. Philemon ought to be motivated to follow Paul’s advice, not only because Paul was a friend and spiritual mentor, but because Paul was *an old man*. By referring to himself as an old man, Paul was reminding Philemon’s that the younger respects the elder.
- Second, Paul described himself as *a prisoner of Christ Jesus*. Paul’s authority in his appeal to

Philemon came not from position or popularity, but from Christ alone.

10 “beseech thee for my son Onesimus, whom I have begotten in my bonds:”

- Paul skillfully crafted this letter, with its introduction and sincere compliments to Philemon, here beginning to state his appeal but only giving Onesimus' name at the last possible moment, and then never getting to the actual appeal until verse 17.
- Paul first explained that his appeal was on behalf of someone who had become his *son* during Paul's imprisonment; that is, someone Paul had led to Christ from prison. “And, by the way,” Paul added, “it's Onesimus. Remember him?” That Paul called Onesimus a “son” reveals their close relationship.
- What incredible orchestration of the Lord had brought this runaway slave to the door of Paul's prison; Paul, who also had led this slave's master to the Lord!

11 “Which in time past was to thee unprofitable, but now profitable to thee and to me:”

- The name *Onesimus* in Greek means “useful” and was a common name for slaves. A nameless slave might receive his name in the hopes that he would live up to it in serving his master.
- Paul used a play on words, saying that Onesimus had formerly been *useless* to Philemon but had become very *useful* both to Paul and, potentially, to Philemon. Under Philemon's service, Onesimus had failed to live up to his name. Paul was confident, however, that this

new man in Christ would live up to his name if Philemon would take him back. In Colossians 4:9, Paul called Onesimus a “faithful and dear brother”. Onesimus had become known for his faithfulness.

- It is interesting to note that Paul did not ask Philemon to free Onesimus. Paul didn’t condemn or condone slavery, but he worked to transform the relationship. The gospel changes social structures by changing the *people* within those structures. There were several million slaves in the Roman Empire at this time. Slavery was sanctioned by law and was part of the empire’s social makeup. Because many slaves and slave owners had become Christians, the early church had to deal straightforwardly with the question of master/slave relations. In other letters, Paul simply was stating that slaves should serve well and that masters should be fair (**1 Corinthians 7:20–24; Ephesians 6:5–9; Colossians 3:22–4:1**). Paul was not interested in trying to change Roman culture; he wanted to build the church as a new community.

12–13 “Whom I have sent again: thou therefore receive him, that is, mine own bowels: Whom I would have retained with me, that in thy stead he might have ministered unto me in the bonds of the gospel:”

- Although Paul would have liked to have kept Onesimus with him, he was sending Onesimus back, requesting that Philemon accept him not only as a forgiven runaway servant, but also as a brother in Christ. This verse suggests that Onesimus himself would deliver this letter to Philemon, so Philemon

would need to make his decision as he stood face-to-face with his slave.

- Paul described Onesimus as *my very heart*. Paul loved Onesimus dearly, as a father loves a child (v. 10). Paul was willing to give away “his very heart,” a part of himself, in order to return Onesimus permanently to Philemon. This was a sacrifice on Paul’s part, who said, **I wanted to keep him with me, so that he might be of service to me in your place during my imprisonment for the gospel**. Onesimus had truly become “useful” (v. 11). He would have helped him in any way he could; therefore, if Paul had kept Onesimus, Philemon would have been helping Paul in a round-about way. Paul implied that he trusted Onesimus so much that his service could be considered in place of Philemon’s. Paul, imprisoned *for the gospel*, longed for his friends; how difficult it was for him to send away this dear “son.” Yet Paul knew it was the right thing to do; Roman law demanded that a deserting slave be returned to his legal owner (although **Deuteronomy 23:15–16** states the opposite). Because Onesimus belonged to Philemon, Paul chose to send him back.

14 “But without thy mind would I do nothing; that thy benefit should not be as it were of necessity, but willingly.”

- Paul did not try to talk Philemon into allowing Onesimus to return to Rome to serve Paul; Paul may have thought that this was taking advantage of his relationship with Philemon.
- Paul did his part by returning Onesimus to Philemon, preferring that Philemon make the final decision in the

matter. Paul wanted to place no constraint on Philemon. Paul hoped that Philemon would do a “good deed” in pardoning his slave, especially since Onesimus had become a new person in Christ. Philemon would now have to think of Onesimus, not as a piece of property, but as a brother in Christ.

15 “For perhaps he therefore departed for a season, that thou shouldest receive him for ever;”

- Paul considered that all that had happened; Onesimus’s desertion and subsequent conversion to Christ, had been part of God’s plan. God can overrule and bring good out of human sin and folly. Onesimus had caused trouble and heartache, but he had become a new man in Christ, and Philemon would soon have him back. The period of time that Onesimus was gone would be overshadowed by the fact that they would now be together for eternity.
- Paul may still have hoped that Onesimus would be returned to him (Paul). However, he knew that true reconciliation could only occur if (1) Onesimus went back to Philemon, willing to return to his servant role; (2) if Philemon willingly accepted Onesimus back.

16 “Not now as a servant, but above a servant, a brother beloved, specially to me, but how much more unto thee, both in the flesh, and in the Lord?”

- For Philemon to accept Onesimus back, he would have to do so with the understanding that Onesimus had a new status; he was not merely a possession, but a brother in the Lord.

- The phrase *no longer as a slave/servant* has caused much debate. Was this Paul's way of asking Philemon to free Onesimus? Or was it his way of stating that there should be a new spiritual relationship of brother to brother even though they still would be physical master and slave? According to **1 Corinthians 7:21**, Paul encouraged slaves to gain freedom if they could. Thus, it would be consistent for Paul to ask for Onesimus' freedom in this case. But since Paul didn't ask for his freedom directly, it appears that he was content to have Philemon accept Onesimus back as a slave, and trust God to work out the rest. If Onesimus returned to Philemon as his slave, Philemon would be expected to treat his slave in accordance with their relationship in Christ. Paul had given guidelines for slaves and masters in other letters (**1 Corinthians 7:20–24**; **Ephesians 6:5–9**; **Colossians 3:22–4:1**). Onesimus' new status as a believer did not negate his responsibilities to Philemon.
- Paul knew how difficult it might be for Philemon to deal with Onesimus as a *dear brother* after the trouble he had caused. Paul made it clear that he not only trusted Onesimus (v. 13) but that he considered Onesimus a brother in Christ. With these words, Paul placed himself, Philemon, and Onesimus all at the same level. While this prisoner, landowner, and slave had very different social positions, they were equals in Christ.

17 “If thou count me therefore a partner, receive him as myself.”

- In this verse Paul stated his request: *welcome him*. Like the father of the prodigal son in Jesus' parable, Philemon should open his arms to welcome

Onesimus back to his household and, as a new believer, to the church. God had welcomed Onesimus; so should Philemon.

- The word *partner* is *koinonon* from the word *koinonia*, meaning fellowship. Philemon and Paul shared the *koinonia* described in verse 6. Paul wanted Philemon's attitude toward Onesimus to be based on his attitude toward Paul. If Paul and Philemon had fellowship, then Philemon could include Onesimus as well. Paul was relying on his relationship with Philemon (their fellowship and partnership) to urge Philemon to welcome Onesimus as he would welcome Paul (v. 12).

18 "If he hath wronged thee, or oweth thee ought, put that on mine account;"

- Possibly a way Onesimus could have financed his flight was to have stolen money from his master or possessions that he could sell. This would cause Onesimus to be extremely afraid to return to his master. It was bad enough that he had run away, but if he had also stolen money or possessions or had wronged his master in any other way, this would have made his return even more difficult. Thus Paul's letter served as a buffer; giving Onesimus courage to return and giving Philemon the entire picture so that he might deal kindly with his slave.
- Any money or possessions that Onesimus had taken certainly were long gone. Onesimus had no means to repay. Paul asked that any money stolen be charged to his own account; in other words, Onesimus no longer would owe Philemon anything, but Paul would. Paul was not suggesting to Philemon that he simply

forgive Onesimus's debt; the wrong needed to be righted. Instead, Paul took on that debt on behalf of Onesimus. (**Philippians 1:1 and 4:18.**) Onesimus would never know whether the debt was actually demanded and repaid. All he knew was that a debt needed to be paid because of his wrong actions; but that someone else was going to pay it for him. Onesimus got a dose of true Christian love through Paul's action.

19 “I Paul have written it with mine own hand, I will repay it: albeit I do not say to thee how thou owest unto me even thine own self besides.”

- Often Paul would use a secretary to write his letters as he dictated them (**Romans 16:22**). But sometimes at the end of the letters, he would take the pen and write a few words in order to authenticate the letters (**Galatians 6:11; Colossians 4:18**). Most likely this entire letter was written in his own hand, for it was a personal letter to a personal friend. For Paul to write again the words *I will repay it* emphasized that he was placing himself under legal obligation to do so. Paul was not “just saying” this to placate Philemon; he meant to do so by putting it in writing.
- **I say nothing about your owing me even your own self.** While Paul told Philemon to put Onesimus' charge on Paul's “page” in the accounting book, Paul also reminded Philemon that he (Paul) had a huge credit already, in that Philemon owed himself (that is, his conversion, his true *self* in Christ) to Paul. As Philemon's spiritual father, Paul was hoping that Philemon would sense a debt of gratitude that would cause him to accept Onesimus with a spirit of forgiveness.

20 “Yea, brother, let me have joy of thee in the Lord: refresh my bowels in the Lord.”

- Again Paul called Philemon *brother*. In the matters of ledgers and debts, once Onesimus' debt was repaid, Paul would still have a credit, for who can ever repay someone for being used of the Lord to explain salvation and see him or her believe in Christ. Thus Paul asked that the balance be paid in kindness to Onesimus. As Philemon had refreshed the hearts of the saints (v. 7), he would also refresh Paul's heart as well.

21 “Having confidence in thy obedience I wrote unto thee, knowing that thou wilt also do more than I say.”

- Paul's use of the word *obedience* seems strong in contrast to how he had carefully worded his request throughout this letter. But the word “obedience” is more flexible in Greek than in English and does not mean that Paul had been issuing orders. Instead, “obedience” here indicates a person's response to God's will. Paul wanted Philemon to obey in the sense of following God's will.
- Paul was not only confident that Philemon would welcome Onesimus back, but that Philemon would also *do even more* than Paul asked. This may have been a hint that Philemon would willingly free Onesimus, but the “even more” is left unknown. Possibly he was freed and returned to minister to and with Paul.

22 “But withal prepare me also a lodging: for I trust that through your prayers I shall be given unto you.”

- That Paul would ask Philemon to prepare a guest room in his home indicates that Paul expected to be released (**Philippians 2:23–24**). It is likely that Paul was hoping to eventually visit these friends who had been praying for him.
- **“I trust that through your prayers I shall be given unto you.”**
- Paul had never been to Colosse; the word *restored* in Greek means “given as a gift” (the root of the word is *charis*, “grace”). For Philemon and the church in his home to have their prayers answered with a visit from Paul would indeed be a gift of grace. Paul was released from prison soon after writing this letter, but the Bible doesn’t say whether he went to Colosse.

23 “There salute thee Epaphras, my fellowprisoner in Christ Jesus;”

- Epaphras was well known to the Colossians because he had founded the church there (**Colossians 1:7**), perhaps while Paul was living in Ephesus (**Acts 19:10**). Epaphras may have been converted in Ephesus and then had returned to Colosse, his hometown. He was a leader in this church, helping to hold it together in spite of growing persecution and struggles with false doctrine. His report to Paul about the problems in Colosse had prompted Paul to write his letter to the Colossians.

- It is unclear whether Epaphras was actually in prison with Paul. Paul's words *fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus* may have been a metaphor of warfare or "captivity to/in Christ."

24 "Marcus, Aristarchus, Demas, Lucas, my fellowlabourers."

- Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke are also mentioned in **Colossians 4:10, 14**. Mark had accompanied Paul and Barnabas on their first missionary journey (**Acts 12:25ff.**) and eventually wrote the Gospel of Mark. Luke had accompanied Paul on his third missionary journey and was the writer of the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts. Demas had been faithful to Paul for a while but then had deserted him (**2 Timothy 4:10**). Paul had sent greetings from these same people in the letter to the Colossians

25 "The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Amen."

- The word *your* is plural, indicating that Paul sent this final blessing not to Philemon only, but to the entire church that regularly met in his home (v. 2). As Paul had begun his letter with "grace" (v. 3), so he ended it with the benediction that the believers would continue to experience God's unmerited favor. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ is with Christians' spirits because the Spirit of Jesus Christ indwells the human spirits of believers (**Romans 8:9-11**).
- It would take God's grace working in Philemon to enable him to do something difficult, something unnatural; forgiving, welcoming, and accepting into

the fellowship as a brother a slave who had at one time proven himself to be unfaithful and untrustworthy. It would be through God's grace alone that this reconciliation would be possible. Yet the grace was available; Philemon only had to by faith, take possession of it. If the entire letter was meant to be read to the church that met in Philemon's home, then they too would, by God's grace, also need to welcome and accept Onesimus. God's grace, working in the spirits of believers, makes true fellowship and reconciliation possible within any body of believers (**Titus 2:11, 12**).

Fellowship
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