

Philemon 1:17-20

<https://thebiblesays.com/commentary/phlm/phlm-1/philemon-117-20/>

Paul asks Philemon to forgive any debt that Onesimus owes him. He also promises to pay Philemon back, if necessary. Paul adds that he would consider Philemon's forgiveness of Onesimus as a full return of blessing for Paul's sharing of the gospel with Philemon.

Paul had made two big requests of Philemon. He had asked Philemon to return Onesimus to Rome where he could continue ministering to *Paul* and advance the gospel (Philemon 1:11-14). He had asked Philemon to recognize Onesimus for who he was (*a brother in the Lord*) and to set him free from having legal status under Roman law as a slave (Philemon 1:15-16). Both requests would have affected Philemon's business and possibly the affairs within his household. Releasing a slave was expensive.

But *Paul* was not finished making big requests of Philemon.

Paul wrote, *if then you regard me a partner, accept him as you would me*. Based upon *Paul's* earlier commendation of Philemon, it is obvious that the apostle had a high *regard* for this Colossian believer (Philemon 1:4-7). Based upon *Paul's* status as an apostle and a leader of the Gentile church, it is likely that Philemon held *Paul* in an even higher *regard*. They were ministry partners in *Christ's* kingdom. Almost certainly did Philemon *regard Paul as a partner*, or at the least he would have been honored to do so. Now *Paul* invited Philemon to regard Onesimus, his run-away and returned slave, with the same level of respect. This episode provides a picture of how believers can engage with one another constructively, to consider themselves partners in the common venture of building and advancing the Kingdom of God.

Then *Paul* added, *but if he has wronged you in any way or owes you anything, charge that to my account*. Beyond this statement, the letter does not go into detail of how Onesimus *wronged* Philemon. As Onesimus's spiritual father, *Paul* was probably aware of what he'd done. It is not hard to fill in the gap that Onesimus confessed to *Paul* how *he* had *wronged* Philemon.

The only clue of what the wrong might have been beyond the crime of running away was *Paul's* comment and offer *if he owes you anything, charge that to my account*. This may indicate that Onesimus stole from Philemon or embezzled from him when he bolted. If true, it was unlikely that a runaway slave could ever have enough money to pay back what he'd taken. This may help explain why *Paul* asked Philemon to *charge that to my account*. *Paul* will make clear that the phrase *charge that to my account* literally means that *Paul* intends to pay. However, *Paul's* approach to Philemon also holds out the opportunity for Philemon to make this a donation to *Paul's* ministry, as a ministry *partner*.

When we consider how Onesimus had wronged Philemon, alongside the fact that *Paul* sent Onesimus back home to Colossae with Tychicus, the bearer of the Colossian letter (Colossians 4:7-9), means that it is very possible, if not probable, that Onesimus was the one who hand delivered this letter to Philemon.

Such an act would display remarkable faith and love on behalf of Onesimus. He had no assurance of the outcome. It was nearly a thousand miles from Rome to Colossae. And it seems the main purpose of Onesimus traveling back to Colossae was to reconcile with Philemon. It may have taken up to half year to return—just to apologize and submit to Philemon. But relationships matter. Such a voyage would not have been without considerable cost, given the fact that Onesimus was so useful to Paul. Each step of the long journey from Rome to Colossae would have been a reminder of his crime. But Onesimus was intent on taking personal responsibility for his actions and setting things right.

In a sense, Onesimus was a real-life prodigal son returning home *in the Lord's* parable (Luke 15:11-32). And Philemon had a real opportunity to respond as the elder brother of that parable should have responded—with mercy and joy.

But there is another of the Lord's parables that especially pertained to Philemon's circumstance: "The Parable of The Unforgiving Steward" (Matthew 18:23-35).

In this parable, Jesus told Peter and the disciples that the Kingdom of Heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle his accounts with his servants. The king summoned one of his advisors who owed him the unfathomable sum of ten thousand talents. This advisor begged for mercy, and the king granted it to him. But then this same advisor returned home and demanded that his own servant pay him back a small sum. When the servant said he was unable to do so and begged for mercy, the advisor became enraged and threw him into debtor's prison. When the king learned of how his advisor was merciless, he threw his advisor into prison until he was able to pay back the ten thousand talents.

This parable features what is described as "The Mercy Principle". The Mercy Principle is one of the main teachings of Jesus (Matthew 5:7; 5:44; 6:12; 6:14-15; 7:1-2; 7:12; 18:22-35) Simply stated, the Mercy Principle teaches that God treats and forgives us as we treat and forgive others. Even though we unconditionally receive the gift of eternal life and are born into Christ's family, the inheritance eternal life; our relationship with Christ, our rewards and standing in His kingdom are dependent upon how we treat and forgive others.

In a very literal sense, Philemon has been forgiven much by God. In fact, every believer has been forgiven a debt we could never repay. And here Philemon has an opportunity to forgive Onesimus of comparatively little. As he shows forgiveness, he has an incredible opportunity to not only change Onesimus's life, bless Paul, and advance the gospel in Rome, but also become much closer to Jesus in the process, and lay up treasure in heaven.

After *Paul* asked Philemon to charge anything Onesimus owed him to his *account*, he wrote *I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand, I will repay it*. He said this as a way to personally assume responsibility for any debt as though his letter were a contract. This line also highlights that Timothy was the scribe who was recording *Paul's* thoughts.

Then *Paul* added a parenthetical line: (*not to mention to you that you owe to me even your own self as well*). This indicates to us that *Paul* played an instrumental role in bringing Philemon to Christ and/or helping him grow and mature "in the Lord" (Philemon 1:20). As Onesimus was

Paul's "child," Philemon may have been *Paul's* "grandchild" through Epaphras. In *Paul's* letter to the Colossians, *Paul* refers to Epaphras as a "beloved fellow bond-servant, who is a faithful servant of Christ on our behalf, and he also informed us of your love in the Spirit." That *Paul* refers to Epaphras as being a bond-servant of Christ "on our behalf" indicates that *Paul* considered Epaphras an extension of his ministry. And that *Paul* indicated that Epaphras "informed us of your love in the Spirit" indicates that Epaphras had direct communication with *Paul*. Thus, it could be that *Paul's* claim to Philemon that *you owe to me even your own self* could be deduced through an extension of *Paul's* ministry through Epaphras.

What is clear is that without *Paul*, Philemon would not be who he was in Jesus. Thus, he owed his very identity, his *self to Paul*, along with his resulting faithfulness to the gospel and love toward Philemon.

Some interpret this line as *Paul* trying to manipulate Philemon and guilt him into doing what *Paul* desires. But this interpretation would be out of character and tone with the rest of the letter. *Paul* had gone out of his way to appeal to Philemon as his equal and not his superior. He did not make his appeals as an apostle, but a prisoner of the Lord (Philemon 1:9). *Paul's* heart toward Philemon was loving (Philemon 1:9). He was being truthful (Philemon 1:14). *Paul* makes it clear that it is Philemon's choice before the Lord. But *Paul* does not hesitate to point out factual realities.

When *Paul* wrote *not to mention to you that you owe to me even your own self as well*, he likely was letting Philemon know that if the latter wished to pay him back for the great good the former had done to him, this would settle the debt. Perhaps Philemon had tried to pay *Paul* back in the past for opening his eyes to life in Jesus. But how exactly can one repay someone for sharing the gospel with them? What can repay the bearer of grace for such a favor? *Paul* was informing Philemon that if he would do what he asked, he would consider this as the best blessing that Philemon could ever do for him, and would repay such a relational "debt."

In speaking in transactional terms, *Paul* is using a figure of speech. Love is not transactional, like earthly goods. Christ-like love is sacrificial. It is never given with an expectation to be paid back. Love "does not seek its own" (1 Corinthians 13:5). *Paul* used a transactional metaphor to Philemon, a man of business, to describe the full value of *Paul's* appeals.

Paul described love with another transactional metaphor in Romans 13:8, "Owe nothing to anyone except to love one another; for he who loves his neighbor has fulfilled the law."

Because of God's unconditional love for us, we are always in a love debt. Jesus commanded his followers to love others as He loved us. Likewise, *Paul* was asking Philemon to love Onesimus, as he and Christ loved Philemon.

Biblical Text

17 If then you regard me a partner, accept him as you would me. 18 But if he has wronged you in any way or owes you anything, charge that to my account; 19 I, Paul, am writing

this with my own hand, I will repay it (not to mention to you that you owe to me even your own self as well).