

Philemon 1-7

A Lesson for Small Groups by Will Groben

Leader Introduction

1. This week, there is a one-page handout. You might need to print off enough copies of the last page of this lesson to distribute one to each person in your group, depending on whether you intend to discuss the associated question.
 2. We want people to consider whether they are ministering – ¹making an impact, ²by serving with their gifts and passions, ³in their ministry calling – or just volunteering.
 3. Secondarily, we want everyone to consider the scriptural truth that we are no longer slaves to sin, but rather are slaves to righteousness [slaves to Christ], and to come up with some action steps to make that transformation more of a reality in their lives.
- † The Leader should forward this lesson plan to the right person as soon as possible.
 - † The Leader should ensure the lesson is taught effectively, and that the discussion is one that edifies and unifies the group members.
 - † The Leader should plan how to incorporate worship, prayer, and fellowship.
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Background

Paul was a Roman citizen. He also was an apostle and missionary, who founded churches throughout Greece, Turkey, and the Middle East. He wrote many of the Epistles in the New Testament. He wrote this letter around AD60, while in prison. About this time, he also wrote the letters to the Ephesians and Colossians.

Timothy is listed as the co-author with Paul, probably writing this letter by hand. He had a Jewish mother and a Greek father. He was led to Christ in Lystra by Paul, during the first missionary journey, and mentored by him. He went with Paul and Silas on the other two missionary journeys. Despite his youth, he was Paul's special representative to various churches, such as in Corinth and Ephesus. That he is listed as co-author probably indicates he knew Philemon well. Epaphras helped found the church in Colosse, so he would have been well known and respected there. His name would lend even more credibility to what Paul was saying.

Philemon was considered a "fellow worker" in ministry, which is the same title given to Paul's companions later in the letter. He hosted a church in his house [there were no church buildings for Christians back then]. He trusted the Lord, had love for God's people, was generous and kind. He was Paul's friend, came to Christ through Paul's work, and probably was mentored by Paul. He was a wealthy land owner who owned slaves, including Onesimus, and lived in Colosse.

The Bible does not condemn slavery, accepting it as a part of life in those times. During that time in history, in that cultural area, slavery was quite common. When a battle was fought, the losers became slaves to the winners; this was common in all people groups in that area. What set the Israelites apart was that they would not make slaves of their own people. There is nothing in the Bible that says slavery is part of God's ideal or that God forbids it. However, the Bible clearly teaches about how God would have us treat other people [as we want to be treated, with love and compassion, serving them...].

Even in the Old Testament, it is remarkable that God provided the Israelites with a legal code that specified the conditions for freeing slaves, such as if they are mistreated. The emphasis of Jesus' message so far as it touched human slavery was again that we should treat everyone right and that no matter what our situation [including if we found ourselves to be slaves], we should be doing all we could for Christ and others. We are all called to serve and to humble ourselves, and our freedom is spiritual. But that freedom brought slaves and slave holders to the same level in Christ's kingdom, which was a revolutionary thought at the time.

May God bless your time in the Word!

The Lesson: *[teaching instructions are in italics; things to discuss are not.]*

Ice Breaker: Consider using one ice breaker type question such as these, to get everyone in a talkative mood. If your group has no problem getting there, feel free to skip this step.

- In what job, or in what role, did you feel most like a slave?
 - Did you ever feel like a slave when you were growing up doing chores?
 - Do you sometimes feel like a slave now, always working at the job, the chores, the errands, just to keep afloat in life?
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Teaching from Philemon 1-7

Part I: Be a Minister, not a Volunteer

[This might take all your time, which is ok. If not, proceed on to Parts II and/or III as you think best for your group. We expect all groups to discuss Part I and doubt any groups will get through all three parts.]

Ask someone to read Philemon 1-7.

1. In this first part of the letter to Philemon, Paul affirms Philemon's position in the ministry in several ways. Paul calls Philemon "beloved" and "fellow worker." Paul acknowledges the church that meets in Philemon's house [the Colossian church]. Paul affirms Philemon's strong faith and its resultant ministry of love to other believers. Paul prays that Philemon will continue to grow in his understanding of what Christ is doing in his heart, so he can minister even more effectively. And Paul affirms Philemon's ministry of refreshing the hearts of fellow believers. Later in the letter, Paul refers to Philemon as his "partner" and "brother," and then Paul seeks Philemon's consent on a matter dear to Paul's heart.

People in the world volunteer for all kinds of good things, helping all kinds of good organizations. In the church, we want to go *deeper* in our service. To be a beacon of light for Christ, we want to be ministers, not volunteers. Philemon was not just volunteering, he was serving with passion and gifts, he was making an impact as an important part of the ministry in his church, and there seems no doubt that he felt called to what he did. We need to ask ourselves, are we truly ministering in this sense – following a call from God to make an impact with our passion and gifts – or just volunteering to fill a slot?

[Try to draw out how they are serving in ministry, and then whether they believe that is a calling, a use of their gifts and passions, and making an impact.]

2. *[Ask someone to read Ephesians 2:10. Ask another to read 1 Peter 4:10-11]* Do you believe this verse? *Follow up:* Are you willing to obey it and serve God with the gifts he gave you to do the work he created you to do?

3. What steps can we take to move from just volunteering to fully ministering?

[Some suggestions might be to use our SHAPE more effectively, to try more ministries to find our passion, to focus more on the one ministry God has for us instead of spreading ourselves around, to find ways to really make an impact instead of just doing tasks...]

4. Paul said Philemon refreshed the souls of the saints. What kind of things do people do that refresh your soul? Do any of these fit into your ministry vision for yourself?

Part II: Prisoner of Christ

5. Paul called himself “a prisoner of Christ Jesus.” As we learned in the devotions, this was a “double entendre,” a saying with two meanings. First, as he mentioned in v.13, he was in prison because of his preaching of the gospel of Christ. Second, he was a “captive” of Christ, bound to Christ, even as a slave, which he called himself in several other letters. Why do you think Paul mentioned his imprisonment for Christ or his slavery to Christ in so many letters?

[Ephesians, 2 Timothy, Colossians, Romans, and Philemon for “prisoner,” and Romans, Titus, Philippians, Galatians, and Colossians for “slave”.]

- 6a. We should ask ourselves what it would look like today if we were going to be good “slaves” of God, of Christ, of righteousness. Let’s start first in this passage of Philemon. What do we see in these seven verses that give us a hint at how to approach being at least a good “servant” for God?

Below are some answers you might draw out, if they are not freely offered by the group:

- *Paul was willing to pay any price – even going to prison – to preach the gospel and do what God had called him to do [v.1].*
- *Paul was willing to intervene in a situation to help two friends see what was right [whole letter].*
- *Paul was diligent in his prayers and praises to God, including intercessory prayer for others in ministry [v.4].*
- *Paul was generous in his encouragement and affirmation of others [vv.5, 7].*
- *Paul exhorted others to grow in Christ [v.6].*
- *Philemon was willing to work in ministry [v.1] and host a church [v.2].*
- *Philemon had a strong faith and good expression of love to other believers [vv.5, 7].*

- 6b. What other things would be good expressions of our devotion to Christ?

[There will be other things you can pull out of this letter, such as Paul’s evangelism and mentoring, but you need not limit yourself to this letter in considering this question.]

Part III: From slave of sin to slave of righteousness

Ask someone to read Romans 6:17-18.

7. When we accepted in faith what Christ did for us on the cross, we were “born again,” and this transformation from slave-of-sin to slave-of-righteousness was accomplished in us. It is a done deal! But are we living it out? Are we living like this transformation was a done deal? This is a time when we need to be a little open and vulnerable with each other. We need to talk about the ways we are struggling to realize this change, either ¹because we continue to do sinful things or ²because we struggle to do the positive things that are a part of the vision God has for the Christian life.

[Try to encourage participation here, but – of course – not everyone need speak. Be sure the group’s attitude toward each other is one of loving acceptance and encouragement. You might use this as an opportunity to increase accountability on these issues.]

If you have not already, distribute the hand-out [see last page of this lesson].

8. Let’s take a couple of minutes to quickly read through this self-assessment. When you are done, think about what action steps you want to take to live more like this transformation is real.

[Allow a couple of minutes for completion.]

9. Who wants to go first? What are the most important action steps you are going to take, to help you realize this change in status, from slave of sin to slave of righteousness?

Devotion Impact: *Consider asking whether anyone was blessed by doing the devotion this week, to allow them to express what God has been doing in their lives through the devotions. There might be no need for this, if the previous discussion allowed them to express these thoughts.*

Evidence of Sanctification [spiritual growth and healing]

Experience of Fruit of the SpiritGrowing Fast--Growing Slowly--Stagnating
[love, joy, peace, patience, goodness, kindness, gentleness, faithfulness, self control]

Growth toward Maturity in ChristGrowing Fast--Growing Slowly--Stagnating
[knowledge of God, assurance in situations, discernment of spiritual things]

Transformation toward Christ-LikenessGrowing Fast--Growing Slowly--Stagnating
[values, actions, thoughts, priorities, all more like Christ's]

Intimacy with GodGrowing Fast--Growing Slowly--Stagnating

Diagnosing Problems in the Healing and Growth Process

I have accepted Jesus as my Savior. Yes!--- Unsure ---No

I submit to Christ's [scripture's] authority on issues of my life..... Yes!---Somewhat---No

I am willing to be dependent and yield to the Holy Spirit's will in my daily decision making..... Yes!---Somewhat---No

I am eager to sense the Holy Spirit's prompting in my life. Yes!---Somewhat---No

I regularly confess my sins to God..... Yes!---Somewhat---No

I have human accountability in my life..... Yes!---Somewhat---No

I believe that I am no longer a slave to sin, now being free in Christ..... Yes!---Somewhat---No

I know and believe the many promises that go along with salvation..... Yes!---Somewhat---No
[identity, freedom, transformation, value, empowerment, et cetera]

I accept and believe in the spiritual cleansing and healing promised in scripture. Yes!---Somewhat---No

I am determined to resist temptation with God's help. Yes!---Somewhat---No

I spend time during the week in personal worship..... Yes!---Somewhat---No

I spend time daily in prayer about myself and my life..... Yes!---Somewhat---No

I spend time daily in God's Word..... Yes!---Somewhat---No

I am fully participating in Christian fellowship and friendships..... Yes!---Somewhat---No

I am using my spiritual gifts and passions to serve in ministry. Yes!---Somewhat---No

Philemon 8-14

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Leader Introduction

1. This week, there are no specific materials needed.
 2. This week, we are trying to encourage everyone to be intentional about being a true disciple of Christ, as well as to be involved in Christ's ministry of making disciples.
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 - † The Leader should ensure the lesson is taught effectively, and that the discussion is one that edifies and unifies the group members.
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Background

Paul was a Roman citizen. He also was an apostle and missionary, who founded churches throughout Greece, Turkey, and the Middle East. He wrote many of the Epistles in the New Testament. He wrote this letter around AD60, while in prison. About this time, he also wrote the letters to the Ephesians and Colossians.

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Philemon was considered a "fellow worker" in ministry, which is the same title given to Paul's companions later in the letter. He hosted a church in his house [there were no church buildings for Christians back then]. He trusted the Lord, had love for God's people, was generous and kind. He was Paul's friend, came to Christ through Paul's work, and probably was mentored by Paul. He was a wealthy land owner who owned slaves, including Onesimus, and lived in Colosse.

The Bible does not condemn slavery, accepting it as a part of life in those times. During that time in history, in that cultural area, slavery was quite common. When a battle was fought, the losers became slaves to the winners; this was common in all people groups in that area. What set the Israelites apart was that they would not make slaves of their own people. There is nothing in the Bible that says slavery is part of God's ideal or that God forbids it. However, the Bible clearly teaches about how God would have us treat other people [as we want to be treated, with love and compassion, serving them...].

Even in the Old Testament, it is remarkable that God provided the Israelites with a legal code that specified the conditions for freeing slaves, such as if they are mistreated. The emphasis of Jesus' message so far as it touched human slavery was again that we should treat everyone right and that no matter what our situation [including if we found ourselves to be slaves], we should be doing all we could for Christ and others. We are all called to serve and to humble ourselves, and our freedom is spiritual. But that freedom brought slaves and slave holders to the same level in Christ's kingdom, which was a revolutionary thought at the time.

May God bless your time in the Word!

The Lesson: *[teaching instructions are in italics; things to discuss are not.]*

Ice Breaker: Consider using one ice breaker type question such as these, to get everyone in a talkative mood. If your group has no problem getting there, feel free to skip this step.

- Has anyone ever had a mentor or mentored someone else at work?
- If you could be more like any one living person, who would it be and why?

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Teaching from Philemon 8-14 *[The anticipated discussion time is thirty to forty-five minutes, but this will vary depending on your group. The questions are designed as a set and in an order, but you might want to emphasize discussion of one and minimize discussion of another to suit your group members.]*

Ask someone to read Philemon 1-14.

1. Paul is asking Philemon to grasp a whole new level of faith and love. Was there a time that someone or something inspired you to take a large step of growth in faith and love?
 - *Follow up:* What exactly inspired you to change?
 - *Follow up:* What was God's role in that process?
 - *Follow up:* Do you think you become more of what you are taught or of what you caught by being with that person and going through that experience?
2. For Paul to exhort Philemon so confidently in this way, he must have been sure that Philemon had as much affection and respect for him as he had for Philemon. Is there anyone in your life today who is in a position of influence like that, someone you respect and like so much that you would want to be more like him or her and would be highly likely to agree to any moral request?
 - *If nobody responds, ask if there ever has been anyone like that in their lives. If nobody responds positively to that, ask what it would take for someone to have that kind of influence in their lives.*
3. The model for evangelistic church growth that Jesus set in motion was not writing best-selling books, it was not printing a gospel newspaper throughout the empire, it was not even holding huge evangelistic events... rather, it was calling and building disciples.¹ Has anyone here been intentionally mentored by someone on faith issues? What was your experience?
 - *You might follow up by asking one or more of the following:*
 - A. *for details about the process;*
 - B. *how they were blessed by the process; and/or*

¹ This thought is from Allen Hadidian's *Discipleship*, p.11.

C. *whether they ¹grew in intimacy with God, ²improved their Christian walk, and ³got equipped to mentor others.*

4. If there was someone in the church who could help you assess your spirituality, assist you in achieving greater intimacy with God, guide you into a more Spirit-led and Christ-like life, and equip you to do the same for others, would you be interested in spending time with that person on a regular basis for the purpose of mentoring? Why or why not?
5. Has anyone here intentionally mentored someone else in this way?
6. If the church provided tools and guidelines to help you assess a person's spirituality, assist that person in achieving intimacy with God, guide that person into a Spirit-led and Christ-like life, and equip that person to do the same for others, would you be interested in mentoring someone? Why or why not? *Follow up: are there fears about this process?*

[If people are interested in getting training to mentor others, ask them to please contact David Cooper, who is gauging interest as we develop a plan to promote mentoring.]

7. Even if we have human mentors to help us, the goal is still to be a true disciple of Christ. As you might recall from the devotion, a true disciple is one who is devoted to adopting the ways and teachings of his mentor, in this case Christ. That means true disciples of Christ do their best over time to adopt the attitudes, priorities, values, and ministry activities of Christ. True disciples were also Christ's servants and his witnesses, shining a neon light into their communities by adopting Kingdom values and habits and thus being different from the culture around them. Last week, we discussed being a co-priest in the ministry. How does this co-priest concept affect your understanding of being a true disciple of Christ?
8. Think about Christ's attitudes, priorities, values, ministry activities, servant attitude, and witness: do you think you are a true disciple of Christ or more like a camp-follower? Why?
 - *Follow up:* What action steps can you take to improve your depth of discipleship?

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Sermon Impact: *Consider using one of the following type questions to generate discussion of the sermon topic's relevance to their lives. There might be no need for this, if the previous discussion allowed them to express these thoughts.*

- What aspect of the sermon was most important or applicable to you?
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^^^^^^^^^^

Devotion Impact: *Consider using one of the following type questions to allow them to express what God has been doing in their lives through the devotions. There might be no need for this, if the previous discussion allowed them to express these thoughts.*

- Was anyone blessed by doing the devotion this week?
- Did anyone find the devotion for this week especially stimulating, enlightening, or convicting?

Philemon 15-25

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Leader Introduction

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This week, we hope people will come to a greater commitment of involvement in the Christian community and a greater intentionality in relationships.

Background

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Ice Breaker: Consider using one ice breaker type question such as these, to get everyone in a talkative mood. If your group has no problem getting there, feel free to skip this step.

- † What most blesses you about being in a small group?
 - † If you could improve the fellowship experience of this group in one way, what would it be?
 - † Of what aspect of friendship would you like more in your relationships?
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Teaching from Philemon 15-25

Ask someone to read Philemon 15-25.

1. Paul's relationship with Philemon and Philemon's relationship with the members of his church are not casual associations. Rather, what we see are intimate, intense, cooperative, relationships. With Paul, Philemon's relationship is father to son, mentor to disciple, leader to lieutenant. With his fellow believers in Colosse, Philemon is a leader, a servant, a host, a brother, a mentor...

A. Assess the depth of your relationships in the church and in this group: are they casual, somewhat shallow, acquaintanceships? or are they intentional, deep, friendships? What makes you say so?

B. Consider the relationships within this group: what can we do to become deeper friends, true brothers and sisters in Christ? *Follow up:* What steps should we take to make this happen?

C. We tend to think "me-first," which is reinforced by the individualism and self indulgence aspects of our culture, but that is not the biblical model. As a member of this group, are you willing to be held accountable and to be responsible for working for the well being of the others in the group?

D. Do you think it is a community responsibility to bring up each other's children together? *Follow up:* in the context of our relationships in this group, if one of us corrected your child's behavior, would you accept that rebuke to your child or would you defend the child instinctively?

2. Paul said Philemon was his partner. Paul called on Philemon for obedience. Paul anticipated Philemon's ministrations both in this matter and in a future visit. Paul had *expectations* of Philemon, based on Philemon's commitment to Christ and to the body of Christ.

A. What kind of expectations do you have for fellow church members or group members?

B. Ask someone to read Ephesians 4:11-12. Do you think it is right that the church leaders have expectations of members today?

C. Some expectations for the church of today are that we be active in building disciples – both leading people to Christ [witness] and raising them up to be strong believers [teach] – and that we serve as part of the ministry team by using our SHAPE [spiritual gifts, heart/passions, abilities, personality, experiences]. We have talked about both of those things during the past couple of lessons. Another expectation is that we realize we are called to responsibility in this community. Being in community is not just to be blessed, it is where we have an impact on other people’s lives, a place where we refresh their hearts. Based on your knowledge of scripture, what do you think are our responsibilities to each other in this group and in the church?

[Note, you can use the verses at the end of this lesson, if you desire, but there are also many other good verses you might find yourself or ask them to find. Some passages that discuss involvement and use of gifts are Romans 12:4-8; 1 Peter 4:10-11; Ephesians 4:16. If you really want to promote healthy fellowship in your group, you might spend more time on this and skip the next section.]

3. These additional questions are for groups who have more time for discussion.

A. Paul is leading Philemon to see Onesimus as a brother in Christ instead of as a slave. We can consider this information when we think of how we deal with others in church. Do you struggle to lovingly accept some people in church, such as those who are less successful in life, those who are less strong in their faith, those who dress differently, those who are handicapped, those who have tattoos and body piercings, those who are recovering addicts, those who have sinned grievously in the past, those of a different age group... Do you need to show more grace, more love, more acceptance?

B. Besides serving in ministry, in what ways are you making an impact on people in the church through your relationships with them?

Sermon Impact: Consider using one of the following type questions to generate discussion of the sermon topic’s relevance to their lives. There might be no need for this, if the previous discussion allowed them to express these thoughts.

- † What aspect of the sermon was most important or applicable to you?
- † Was there anything in the sermon about which you want to spend more time reflecting?
- † Did anything about the sermon strike you as provocative or really grab your attention?

Devotion Impact: Consider allowing your group to express what God has been doing in their lives through the devotions. There might be no need for this, if the previous discussion allowed them to express these thoughts.

Serve/help [Joh 13:14; Ga 5:13; 6:2; 1 Pe 4:10]

Love [Joh 13:34; 15:12, 17; 1 Tim 3:12; 4:9; 1 Pe 1:22; 4:8; 1 Jo 3:11, 23; 4:7, 11; 2 Jo 1:5]

Be Devoted to [Ro 12:10]

Do not judge [Ro 12:16; Ro 14:13; Jas 4:11; 5:9]

Build up/edify [Ro 14:19; 1 Th 5:11]

Accept [Ro 15:7]

Be able to admonish [Ro 15:14]

Greet [Ro 16:16; 1Co 16:20; 2Co 13:12; 1 Pe 5:14]

Do not sue/attack [1Co 6:7; Ga 5:15]

Care for [1Co 12:25]

Do not challenge/envy [Ga 5:26]

Be tolerant and patient with [Eph 4:2; Col 3:13]

Speak truth to [Eph 4:25; Col 3:9]

Be kind to [Eph 4:32]

Forgive [Eph 4:32; Col 3:13]

Be subject to [Eph 5:21; 1 Pe 5:5]

Honor [Php 2:3]

Comfort [1Th 4:18]

Encourage [1Th 5:11; Heb 3:13, 25]

Be at peace with [1Th 5:13]

Seek good for [1Th 5:15]

Stimulate [for love and good deeds: Heb 10:24]

Confess to [Jas 5:16]

Pray for [Jas 5:16]

Be hospitable to [1Pe 4:9]