

PAUL'S INTERVENTION IN THE PHILEMON-ONESIMUS DYNAMIC: A BLUEPRINT FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE AND LOVING KINDNESS

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.20769848>

| Article History | Abstract |
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| Original Research Article | <p><i>This article examines the Epistle to Philemon as a profound theological and ethical intervention by the Apostle Paul into a first-century Roman social crisis—specifically, the relationship between the slave-owner, Philemon, and his fugitive slave, Onesimus. Moving beyond traditional interpretations that focus primarily on personal reconciliation or metaphorical spiritual readings, this study argues that Paul's letter constructs a radical blueprint for social justice and compassion within the early Christian community. By analysing the letter's rhetorical strategy, its redefinition of key social identities (brother, partner, slave), and its subversion of the prevailing Roman paterfamilias and slavery structures, we demonstrate how Paul leverages the new reality en Christo (in Christ) to advocate for a transformative, albeit incremental, praxis. To lend credence to this, Pope Leo's encyclical, <i>Delixit Te</i>, provides a blueprint for practising social justice and loving-kindness. He emphasises the importance of treating all human beings with dignity and respect, regardless of their race, gender, or social status. The article contends that Philemon is not a tacit endorsement of slavery but a strategic, context-sensitive model for dismantling systemic injustice from within, emphasising human dignity, voluntary mutuality, and costly grace. This Pauline blueprint remains a critical resource for contemporary Christian social ethics, offering principles for engaging systemic inequity with both theological conviction and pragmatic wisdom.</i></p> <p>Keywords: Philemon, Onesimus, Paul, Slavery, Social Justice, Loving kindness.</p> |
| Received: 18-04-2026 | |
| Accepted: 25-05-2026 | |
| Published: 20-06-2026 | |
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1. Introduction

The Epistle to Philemon, the shortest of Paul's extant letters, presents a significant hermeneutical challenge. Although personal in tone, it is not a private correspondence. The letter is addressed primarily to Philemon, as well as to Apphia, likely his wife, and to the congregation meeting in Philemon's house (1-2). Archippus is also named as a recipient. While its situational and personal character may seem minor compared to the major theological works of Romans and Galatians, the Epistle contains a highly influential and debated social intervention within its 25 verses. The narrative centres on Onesimus, a *doulos* (slave) who has apparently wronged his master, Philemon, possibly by fleeing and committing theft (v. 18), and who subsequently encounters Paul in prison. During this encounter, Onesimus becomes a Christian. Paul

then sends him back to Philemon with this letter, which exemplifies persuasive and transformative diplomacy.

The interpretive history of the Epistle to Philemon reveals persistent tensions within the text. Since the patristic era, the letter has functioned both as a justification for slavery, by emphasising Onesimus' return, and as a subtle critique, by highlighting his new status as a brother. Early commentators such as Chrysostom interpreted Paul as supporting the prevailing social order while advocating kindness, whereas later figures like Augustine identified elements of a more radical brotherhood. Contemporary scholarship generally identifies three principal positions. The first asserts that Paul's actions are fundamentally revolutionary, arguing that by erasing the slave-master distinction and referring to Onesimus as a brother, Paul challenges the institution of slavery itself. The second

position regards Paul as a reformist, suggesting he operates pragmatically within his context to foster more humane and just relationships without directly confronting the system. The third, more critical perspective maintains that Paul ultimately upholds the status *quo by* returning Onesimus to Philemon and refraining from explicitly condemning slavery. This paper examines Paul's role in mediating the conflict between Philemon and Onesimus within the broader context of Roman slavery.

The Epistle presents a transformative model for social change, grounded in the concept of universal brotherhood rather than political upheaval. Paul's approach provides a framework for justice, compassion, and loving kindness. He reframes the relationship between Philemon and Onesimus by appealing to love and personal choice rather than legal rights or ownership. While acknowledging Philemon's legal authority, Paul encourages him to view Onesimus as a "beloved brother"—first spiritually, and now also in human terms. This theological shift challenges the foundations of slavery. Paul's willingness to assume any debt incurred by Onesimus exemplifies principles of restorative justice and grace. His appeal is rooted in partnership and persuasion, emphasising that Philemon retains the freedom to "do even more than I say." This intervention demonstrates that meaningful social change begins with transforming personal interactions through empathy, respect, and a radical sense of equality among all people in Christ.

Paul's model remains relevant in contemporary contexts, as numerous Christian groups adopt his approach to address current justice issues such as racism, economic inequality, and immigration. Instead of focusing exclusively on legal or institutional reforms, these movements prioritise personal relationships, moral persuasion, and the cultivation of inclusive communities that honor the dignity of every individual. Consequently, the themes of the Epistle continue to resonate in modern efforts to promote reconciliation and justice, demonstrating that the principles exemplified by Paul inspire ongoing social transformation within Christian ethics.

To further support this analysis, Pope Leo's encyclical *Delixit Te* provides a framework for practicing social justice and loving-kindness. Issued at the turn of the twentieth century, the encyclical addresses social inequality and calls on Christians to recognise the inherent dignity of every person. Leo encourages the faithful to promote works of mercy, solidarity, and respect for all, particularly the most marginalised. This message aligns with the themes of

Philemon, as both texts assert that authentic Christian relationships transcend social divisions and require a re-imagining of community based on mutual respect. Although Paul does not explicitly condemn slavery, his arguments challenge its moral legitimacy by prioritizing faith-based kinship over societal structures.

This article contends that Paul's intervention offers a threefold blueprint: (1) a theological reframing of identity that dismantles social hierarchies, (2) a rhetoric of compassionate persuasion that empowers voluntary and costly action, and (3) a praxis of transformative reconciliation that seeks justice within existing structures as a precursor to their eventual transformation.

2. The Contextual Tension

Theological scholarship and biblical studies are not free of differences in interpretation, nor opinion. Scholars often argue between authorship, historical context, dating, provenance and meaning of biblical texts. Although disagreements of this type can sometimes seem serious they do not have to divide the Christian world. But you can maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace, if your core doctrinal convictions hold firm. According to Charles Scalise, if consensus is not secured at the expense of essential parts of the church, whatever important remaining differences take place in subsequent steps are best viewed as non-binding grounds for ecclesiastical separation.¹ So, while there are different interpretational approaches, an outline of the concept is still a well-trod ground that nearly all Christians share concerning the ultimate authority of Scripture as truly God-breathed, perfect and without error.

The Epistle to Philemon has perplexed the many scholars who have studied it. One view is that Onesimus was not really a runaway slave, but rather under the law of his society though a slave.² This explains why congregation members who met in Philemon's house knew about Paul's association with Onesimus. Thus when Paul writes, he is not merely requesting that Onesimus be returned to his master, but rather appealing that Onesimus be better than a slave and allowed by Philemon to stay with Paul in the gospel ministry.³ This reading focuses on the changing social relations in the early Christian community and draws attention to the basic equality of all believers in Christ.

A second interpretation reads the letter as dealing with a fractured relationship between two Christian siblings, Philemon and Onesimus.⁴ Within this understanding, the letters of Paul represents a concrete example of Christian forgiveness and reconciliation. The epistle is understood to

¹ Charles Scalise, "Agreeing on Where We Disagree: Lindbeck's Post-liberalism and Pastoral Theology," *Journal of Pastoral Theology*, 8(1), (1998), 43-51.

² Sara Winter, "Paul's Letter to Philemon," *New Testament Studies*, 33(1), (1987), 115.

³ Winter, "Paul's Letter to Philemon," 115.

⁴ Allen Callahan, *Embassy of Onesimus: The Letter of Paul to Philemon* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1997), 2.

be responding to larger concerns of Christian behavior, justice, and inter-community relations through the promotion of reconciliation in love and mutual acceptance.⁵ Other scholars have offered a patron-client reading in which they illustrate how Philemon may have worked with Onesimus, sending him to help Paul as an act of support and *de facto* patronage. In this context, the response of Paul is seen as a polite refusal toward the deal while at the same time warning Philemon to avoid taking liberties in their relationship.

Yet another suggestion is that Onesimus ran away and indeed did not run away from slavery, rather he in some way wronged Philemon by misusing funds or misusing entrusted resources.⁶ From this viewpoint, Onesimus came to Paul with the knowledge and consent of Philemon seeking intercession and reconciliation with his master. Onesimus became a believer in Christ and changed his life while working with Paul. Paul then sends him back to Philemon, not protecting him from punishment for being a runaway slave, he advocates on his behalf that perhaps they might be reconciled. Paul is conciliated in this reading, his sole concern being that reconciliation and restoration of fellowship may occur between the two.⁷

Unlike these re-interpretations, the traditional understanding of Epistle to Philemon has Paul intending for Philemon to embrace Onesimus with love and mercy. Although Paul mentions Onesimus is a slave, he appealingly uses this letter to refer to him as someone who is now part of the family in Christ. As a result, the kindness that Paul demands is not simply based on social duty but rather on the good nature of Christian relationships. Thus, the letter is a vivid example of how the gospel redefines human relations through forgiveness, equality, and help between Christians.

3. Paul's Intervention in Philemon-Onesimus Dynamic as a Blueprint to Social Justice

The Epistle to Philemon was written by the apostle Paul while he was in prison in Rome.⁸ Analysing Paul's intervention necessitates an understanding of the societal context he addressed. In the first-century Roman Empire, slavery was widespread; estimates suggest that 20-30% of Italy's population was enslaved, with significant concentrations in urban centres such as Colossae, which was likely Philemon's place of residence. Slavery during this period was primarily economic and martial in nature, encompassing prisoners of war, individuals in debt, and

those born into servitude. The *pater-familias* held absolute authority (*patria potestas*) over the household, including the power of life and death over slaves.

A fugitive slave represented both a loss of property and a significant social and legal violation. The Roman edict *De Fugitivis* prescribed severe punishments, including branding, forced labour in mines, or crucifixion. Consequently, the recovery of a fugitive slave was treated with the utmost seriousness. Within this volatile context, Onesimus appears; his name, meaning "useful" or "beneficial," becomes ironic due to his flight, which renders him "useless" (v. 11) to Philemon and constitutes a breach of the Roman social principles of reciprocity and patronage.

Early Christian communities operated as fragile subcultures within the broader, oppressive Roman system. These groups assembled in households such as Philemon's, situating the church within the *familia*, a social unit defined by hierarchy and ownership. Paul confronted the challenge of advancing a new ethical framework without inciting Roman repression or endangering the nascent church community. Instead of confrontation, Paul adopted a strategy of subversive transformation.

The terms "slave" and "slavery" often evoke strong negative associations, particularly among individuals of African descent. However, nineteenth-century American slavery differed markedly from the forms of slavery described in scripture. In the United States, enslavement was based on race, specifically skin colour. In contrast, Roman slavery was frequently entered voluntarily, as individuals or families might commit to servitude to repay debts (Matt 18). Others became slaves by birth or as a consequence of war. In the Greco-Roman context, slavery could function as a means of social mobility; following manumission, former slaves could accumulate wealth and attain Roman citizenship. For some, therefore, slavery served as a pathway to economic advancement. Scott Bartchy, observes that,

Slavery in the first-century Greco-Roman world differed from New World slavery in several respects. Ethnicity and race were generally not important factors in determining whether one was a slave, quite unlike modern racialised slavery. The slave was encouraged to learn, and in many cases had more education than the owner, which made slaves a wanted commodity, creating economic

⁵ American Bible Society, "Bible Study Guide: Philemon," <http://bibleresources.americanbible.org/resource/bible-study-guide-phialemona> accessed October 15, 2025.

⁶ Perry Kea, "Paul's Letter to Philemon: A Short Analysis of its Values," *Perspectives in Religious Studies*, 23(2), (1996), 223-232.

⁷ D. F. Tolmie, "How Onesimus was Heard Eventually. Some Insights from the History of Interpretation of Paul's letter to Philemon," *Acta Theologica*, 39, (2019), 101-117.

⁸ T. D. Still, *Philippians & Philemon* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, 2011), 45.

value and the opportunity for social growth. A large number of slaves served in positions of trust and responsibility within households, organizations, and administrative systems. They were also allowed to own property (including other slaves) and often practiced the same religion and culture as those who enjoyed free citizenship. Moreover, there were no laws limiting public meetings among slaves. And perhaps most importantly, a large percentage of domestic and urban-slaves had reasonable hopes of being freed by their masters via manumission — often before turning thirty. These attributes are indicative of an early first-century slavery occurring amid a social and economic system that was very much not like the later European chattel slave societies.⁹

Here the greetings of Paul and Timothy to Philemon, Apphia and Archippus were placed in the opening section. (vv. 1–2). Philemon is typically understood as a wealthy Christian living in Colossae who had become a believer under Paul's ministry. The hosting of a congregation in one's house implies a high level of wealth and social standing, with historians estimating that early Christian house churches might have housed several dozen believers. There is no indication that Paul ever traveled to Colossae himself, but there are strong indications that Philemon crossed paths with him on one of his missionary journeys. Most scholars also propose that Apphia was Philemon's wife and Archippus was their son, both of whom appear to have been prominent members of the local Christian community.

After his salutations in verse 1, Paul immediately thanks God for Philemon's exemplary faith and service in verses 4–5. This is a typical expression of thanks that is found often at Paul's letters where prayer and thanksgiving precede particular requests or entreaties (cf. Rom. 1:9; 1 Cor. 1:4; Eph. 1:16; Phil. 1:4–5; Col. 1:3; 1 Thess. 1:2; 2 Tim. 1:3). It was through prayer that Paul served in his ministry, challenging Christians to maturity as a primary factor of his work in the midst of their lives. Paul speaks fondly of reports he has heard of Philemon, to the effect that through faith and love (and his authority in Christ as a response to this), Philemon is doing well within the Christian community with warm leadership and direction for the good of others. He lauds Philemon for his faithfulness (v. 5) and argues that the fundamental ingredients of a Christian witness are genuine faith and love. Paul would be pleased that Philemon needs to be a source of motivation

for other believers and the gospel message will continue. It should also be noted that, in addition to this encouragement and commendation for Philemon's stewardship over servants, Philemon has also been generous and supportive of Paul himself and the other members of the Christian community (likely including both prayerful encouragement & material support towards Paul's ministry).

After commending Philemon, Paul transitions to the letter's primary purpose. Although he holds apostolic authority and could have issued a directive, Paul instead appeals to Philemon in love, as indicated in verse 8: "Wherefore, though I might be much bold in Christ to enjoin thee that which is convenient." This approach exemplifies leadership based on influence rather than coercion, a pattern also evident elsewhere in scripture (1 Cor 9; 2 Cor 10).¹⁰ This is not the first time Paul chose not to usurp his authority in scripture (1 Cor 9; 2 Cor 10). Paul chooses his words carefully, aware that Onesimus' departure may have angered Philemon. In the ancient context, some enslaved individuals were entrusted with significant responsibilities, such as managing farms or business affairs for absent landowners.¹¹ As a wealthy individual, Philemon may have assigned Onesimus such a role, during which Onesimus encountered Paul. Paul's conciliatory approach aligns with the wisdom found in Proverbs: "A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger" (Prov 15:1).

Paul subsequently presents his request concerning Onesimus. Although the specific reason for Onesimus' imprisonment is not disclosed, his encounter with Paul is depicted as providential, leading to his acceptance of the gospel. This meeting results in a profound transformation in Onesimus' life. Upon returning to Philemon, Onesimus is considered valuable not only economically but also spiritually. The text indicates that usefulness extends beyond professional roles and includes the ability to share the gospel with others (1 Cor 3:9).

Paul often referred to Timothy as his *teknon* ("son") in the faith (See 1 Tim 1:2, 18; 2 Tim 1:2; 2:1); he uses the same language to describe Onesimus who had become his son in exactly the same way through the gospel. Onesimus had in past been useless, but now, having changed he is of real benefit. His previous lack of profit is associated with his departure from service under Philemon. Yet the situation of Onesimus cannot be conflated with runaway slaves in subsequent settings, such as the American Underground Railroad. Instead, Onesimus might have tried to escape a duty related to his being Philemon's slave. Paul cleverly plays on the meaning of Onesimus, which is profitable or

⁹ Scott Bartchy, "Slavery (Greco-Roman)," in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York, NY: Doubleday, 6, 1992), 65–73.

¹⁰ J. L. Whittington, T. M. Pitts, W. V. Kageler, & V. L. Goodwin, "Legacy leadership: The Leadership Wisdom of the Apostle Paul," *The Leadership Quarterly*, 16(5), (2005), 749–770.

¹¹ James Jeffers, *The Greco-Roman World of the New Testament era: Exploring the Background of Early Christianity* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1999), 224.

useful in order to highlight the transformation that had taken place in his life. After his conversion, Onesimus became profitable in two ways: as a servant who could now fulfill his duties and as a Christian brother furthering the advance of the gospel. Despite his low social status, Onesimus is both a recipient and a herald of the Christian message. The power of the gospel is all-encompassing, [1] as Charles Spurgeon once rightly stated, “the gospel is for everybody without exception and without restriction”; [2] its relevance and impact are universal.

Paul developed a well-crafted rhetorical strategy in his appeal to Philemon to persuade rather than coerce him. Paul uses strong, personal appeals and gives the final decision to Philemon's entirely free will. His is a non-coercive approach, eschewing any invocation of apostolic authority that might entail coercion. Paul intentionally does not act behind Philemon's back, well aware of the legal rights that Onesimus' status as a slave afforded Philemon, but nevertheless wants Onesimus to stay with him and help him while he is in prison. Paul writes with an awareness of the essentials of Roman law and social order, in which slave owners enjoyed near absolute power over their slaves. To have kept Onesimus apart from Philemon would only offend the accepted legal custom. Instead of ripping the established legal framework apart, Paul decides to respect it while calling on the principles of love, unity and brotherly-kindness we learn through Christ's teachings. It is important to note that neither in Philemon nor elsewhere does Paul offer an endorsement or condemnation of slavery; he speaks to the relationships within existing forms in his context. In fact, as Scott Bartchy has noted, slavery made up such a fundamental part of everyday life in the ancient Mediterranean world that it seldom attracted scrutiny as a social, legal or economic institution.

In fact, Paul interprets the situation regarding Onesimus through a theological filter, stating that his temporary separation from Philemon is possibly a providential development so he could be reunited not just as a slave but now as especially a brother in Christ (v. 15). Paul exhorts Philemon to receive Onesimus, on the basis of their common Christian communion, as Paul would be received. To enhance his case, Paul promises to pay back any damage Onesimus may have done financially (loss of wages or other debts). This gesture also shows Paul's awareness of the economic realities of the Roman world. There were also times when slave owners decided that it was more profitable to manumit their slaves and employ them as

liberated men on contract, minimising the burden of having to feed, shelter and clothe those they would keep. Paul wanted Onesimus to stay with him and help him in the ministry, but he could not ask Philemon to manumit the slave without placing a financial burden on him. He will assume the cost entailed and as such, demonstrates individual responsibility as well as a practical understanding of the cultural and economic values that dictated relationships amongst masters and slaves within first-century Rome.

4. Rhetoric of Persuasion

Paul's letter to Philemon exemplifies rhetorical persuasion, aiming to elicit a specific response while maintaining the agency and dignity of all parties. Paul utilises a deliberate combination of authority and restraint, as well as appeal and obligation.

The Renunciation of Coercion: Paul initially asserts his apostolic authority (“a prisoner of Christ Jesus,” v. 1) and possesses the capacity to command obedience (v. 8). However, he deliberately rejects this approach: “though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do what is required, yet for love's sake I prefer to appeal to you” (v. 8-9). This strategic decision avoids compelling Philemon into public compliance, which could foster resentment and leave prevailing social structures intact. Instead, an appeal grounded in agape (love) aims to transform Philemon's will, encouraging him to internalise a new reality and act from personal conviction. This approach affirms Philemon's personhood while simultaneously challenging his actions.¹²

The Art of the Appeal: Paul's rhetorical strategy is multifaceted, as he appeals to several key motivations:

1. Love and Partnership: Paul highlights Philemon's love for “all the saints” and his reputation for encouraging others (v. 5, 7), thereby establishing a standard to which Philemon is now called to adhere.
2. Mutual Benefit: He plays on the meaning of Onesimus' name, arguing that the formerly “useless” slave is now “useful” to both Philemon and Paul (v. 11). This co-opts the language of utility, transforming it from economic to spiritual
3. Voluntary Choice: The letter's structure guides Philemon toward an autonomous decision. Paul

¹² Verno Robbins, “Rhetoric and culture: Exploring types of Cultural Rhetoric in a Text. *Rhetoric and the New Testament: Essays from the 1992 Heidelberg Conference* (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 447-67.

expresses the desire that Philemon will act “of your own free will” (v. 14, *kata hekousion*). According to Paul, authentic justice cannot be imposed hierarchically; it must be willingly accepted to achieve lasting, transformative effects.

4. Costly Grace and Implied Debt: Paul offers to assume any debt owed by Onesimus (v. 18-19), demonstrating substitutionary solidarity. He then subtly reminds Philemon of his own indebtedness to Paul. The implicit request is for Philemon not only to forgive the debt but also to receive Onesimus as a brother, thereby repaying a more significant spiritual obligation. This form of grace is demanding, requiring a response commensurate with its demand.

This rhetoric models a compassionate approach to social change. It meets people where they are, acknowledges their social location (even if unjust), and appeals to their highest professed ideals to move them toward a more just practice. It is a pedagogy of liberation for the oppressor as much as for the oppressed.

5. A Path to Loving Kindness

Paul, comprehending the moral picture of Greco-Roman society would not hope for a ban on slavery as an outcome but that Philemon would do right by Onesimus in showing him kindness and respect. This is how a Christian ought to be treated, as the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22; Eph. 4:32).¹³ In the opinion of Stanley Stowers, kindness is an acknowledgement of our shared humanity that empowers us to care for one another’s welfare, and treat others with generosity and understanding. This might work when dealing with other scholars, but for a figure as monumental as Paul. N. T. Wright believes the appeal Paul makes here goes beyond mere niceness — it is an implicit critique of traditional master-slave relationships which can only be done through the transformative power of the gospel itself. While not clearly denouncing slavery, Paul’s appeal for Onesimus to be received as a beloved brother offers an entirely different paradigm founded in Christian fellowship rather than societal caste. This is echoed in Paul stating that Onesimus should be viewed, “not now as a servant, but above a servant, a brother beloved.” In this appeal, Paul is making an appeal to the new identity that believers now share in Christ, an identity that transcends social status.

Love is one of the central themes both in Paul and Christian ethics generally. In John 13:35, Jesus said that love would

be the distinguishing mark of His disciples. *Agape* is the most authentic and purest form of love — a selfless, sacrificial unconditional love. The New Testament consistently sets this kind of love as the measure by which Christian relationships should function. Paul emphasizes this by calling Onesimus his “brother” (Gk: *adelphos*, literally: a brother). The term here carries more than just biological meaning; instead, it conveys a connection that is spiritual and initiated through faith in Christ. Paul, in urging Philemon to accept Onesimus as an *adelphos*, is urging him reframe his worldview of Onesimus from property (a slave) to an equal part of the family of God. Thus, in the letter itself, kindness love, and forgiveness are important themes and Paul appeals to each of these virtues with confidence that Philemon will give proper response. He anticipates that Philemon should be aware that through their faith, he and Onesimus are now inextricably linked. So Onesimus must be received as you would any other believer. So biblical witness as a whole highlights the need to show impartial, genuine love toward people of every social rank (James 2:1–10; 1 John 3:16–18).¹⁴

The crux of Paul's concern is how Philemon will receive and treat Onesimus when he comes home. Roman law also granted slave masters considerable power over fugitives and allowed punishments, such as flogging, torture or even execution by crucifixion. While such a course of action would have been perfectly legal, Paul bases his appeal on Christian graces rather than legal rights. In doing so he summons Philemon to a behavior above Roman expectations; treating Onesimus as equal in Christ. Paul writes this appeal from prison and notes that during this time of imprisonment he had led Onesimus to faith through his ministry. So that circumstance has showing, that Paul imprisonment did not prevent the preaching of gospel. Rather, his pain became a launching point for ministry and ultimately needed spiritual work. Paul was faithful and it all worked out for his good as well as many others who he reached with the Gospel by way of his chains.¹⁵

Even though Paul does not contest Philemon's legal entitlement to have slaves, he accepts slavery as an item of the social structure of his time -- something visible also in other writings attributed to him (1 Cor. 7:20–22). Instead of giving a blunt review of the institution, Paul emphasizes behaviour that should represent all Christians regardless of class, ethnicity or sex. As he sees it, Christian behavior must be based in belief and demonstrated through love, compassion and mutual respect. Nonetheless, some

¹³ C. D. Pohl, “Recovering Kindness: An Urgent Virtue in a Ruthless World,” *The Christian Century*, 129(22), (2012), 10–11.

¹⁴ C. D. Pohl, “Recovering Kindness: An Urgent Virtue in a Ruthless World,” *The Christian Century*, 129 (22), (2012), 10–11.

¹⁵ C. S. De Vos, “Once a Slave, Always a Slave? Slavery, Manumission and Relational Patterns in Paul's Letter to Philemon,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament*. 23(82) (2001), 89-105; H. L. Willmington, *Willmington's Guide to the Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc, 1981), 479-480.

scholars argue that verbiage in Paul represents a veiled way to challenge slavery. By stating that in Christ there is no difference between slave and free, and by encouraging Philemon to receive Onesimus as more than a slave, Paul sets forth principles which act against established social hierarchies. This understanding fits well with Paul's wider teaching that because we are all in Christ (Gal. 3:26–28), meaning no one has a superior status within the family of God, he is able to issue simultaneously instructions to slaves and masters on how they ought to behave under their current socio-economic structures (Col. 3:22–4:1).

H. L. Willmington agrees that Paul's request for pardon and reconciliation is beneficial to three parties: Onesimus, Philemon, and himself. Onesimus had both a moral and spiritual obligation to return to his master, or it may adversely affect his complying with God's teachings and stunting the development of his spirituality. Philemon might have had reasons to resent him, but as a Christian he ought to forgive and give Onesimus an opportunity to show that his name means what it sounds like — “profitable” or “useful.” Although his name had not changed, the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ had arrested and completely altered Onesimus. This willingness to take on any financial liability owed by Onesimus demonstrates the cleansing power of the gospel message represented through Paul. By offering to take Onesimus' debt, Paul mimics a kind of substitutionary model that finds its fullest theological realization in the atoning work of Christ who bears human sin and their consequences with the intention of reconciliation or restoration. It establishes a deeper theological significance to the letter by connecting the reconciliation of Philemon and Onesimus with the larger story of redemption that we see throughout the New Testament. Finally, Paul knows that Philemon will do even more than he has promised (21), and ends with a hope (22) for his release from imprisonment and reunion with his church mates.

6. Theological Re-framing: The Dismantling of Social Identity in Christ

Paul's principal strategy involves reconstructing the conceptual framework of Philemon, Onesimus, and the observing church through a radical Christological perspective. He systematically deconstructs and redefines their identities.

From Slave to Beloved Brother: The central point of Paul's intervention appears in verse 16: “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.” This statement is highly significant. Under Roman law, a slave was considered an *instrumentum vocale* (living tool). Rather than immediately demanding manumission, Paul enacts a more profound transformation by redefining

Onesimus' ontological status within the community. The phrase “in the flesh and in the Lord” is essential, as it signifies not only spiritual brotherhood but also a shared earthly and social reality. Within the *ekklēsia*, the master-slave relationship is replaced by a brother-brother dynamic. This shift generates significant tension for the institution of slavery, since the same individual is both a brother in Christ and property under Roman law. Paul intentionally exposes this tension.

From Master to Partner and Co-worker: Paul similarly reframes Philemon's identity. Philemon is addressed not primarily as “Master,” but as “our dear friend and co-worker” (v. 1), *koinōnos* (partner, v. 17), and as one who owes Paul his “very self” (v. 19). Paul elevates Philemon by appealing to his Christian commitment and friendship, while simultaneously placing him under obligation. Philemon's authority is not negated but is instead situated within a network of mutual indebtedness and partnership in the gospel. His *patria potestas* is relativised by his status as a sibling within a new familial structure in which Paul assumes a paternal role (v. 10).

Paul as Mediator and Father: Paul presents himself as the central figure, described as the “old man” and “prisoner of Christ Jesus” (v. 9). He refers to Onesimus as “my child, whose father I have become during my imprisonment” (v. 10). This paternal assertion establishes a new familial allegiance that challenges Philemon's legal authority. Onesimus is described as Paul's own heart (v. 12). In returning Onesimus, Paul is not simply restoring property but is, in effect, sending a part of himself, thereby making any mistreatment of Onesimus a direct affront to Paul.

This theological re-framing serves as a foundation for social justice. Justice originates in the recognition of the full and equal personhood of the oppressed. Paul achieves this not through abstract declarations, but by integrating Onesimus into the familial structure of the Christian community through enduring bonds of love and kinship.

7. *Delixit Te* of Pope Leo XIV: A Call for Social Justice and Loving Kindness

As Christianity continues to evolve, it is essential for leaders to reinforce its core principles. Pope Leo XIV's recent encyclical, *Delixit Te*, highlights the enduring teachings of love and unity within the Christian community. The Pope examines the significance and relevance of these themes for contemporary Christians.

Pope Leo XIV's encyclical emphasises social justice and compassion by referencing Paul's intervention in the relationship between Philemon and Onesimus. Although the era permitted harsh treatment of enslaved people, Paul urges Philemon to accept Onesimus as a brother in Christ

and to reconcile with him. This act exemplifies the Christian values of love, forgiveness, and unity among believers.

By reflecting on the story of Philemon and Onesimus, the Pope reaffirms the importance of forgiveness and reconciliation in Christianity. In a divided world, the message of unity is especially relevant. *Delixit Te* reminds us that all people are equal before God and encourages us to live in harmony, promoting relationships based on mutual respect and love rather than oppression.

Beyond its biblical teachings, *Delixit Te* highlights Saint Paul's lasting influence in Christianity. His intervention in the Philemon-Onesimus relationship demonstrates both his faith and his leadership in advancing the gospel.

8. Implications for Contemporary Christians

The book of Philemon remains highly relevant today. Onesimus' conversion shows that no one is beyond God's grace. The gospel is accessible to all, crossing every boundary. Although Onesimus was a slave, he had a divinely ordained purpose. Like Abraham, Sarah, Jacob, and Paul, his transformation was marked by a new name. Through Paul's ministry, Onesimus became a new creation in Christ (2 Cor. 5:17), embodying the meaning of his name, "useful."¹⁶ Paul uses this wordplay to emphasise Onesimus' new identity. Once not truly useful to Philemon, Onesimus now fulfils his name's purpose as a Christian and should be valued equally. As Paul's spiritual son and Philemon's brother, Onesimus' worth has increased.¹⁷ While slavery is imposed by law, true freedom is found in Christ. Those united with Christ experience new freedom, as slavery and death no longer have authority over them (see Rom 6:5-9).¹⁸

Although Paul was imprisoned, the word of God was not limited (2 Tim. 2:9). When we remain open, God creates opportunities to share our faith in any circumstance.¹⁹ Fruitfulness is possible in every season. Challenges should not deter us from proclaiming the gospel, as its transformative power lies in the message, not the messenger. Hence, Philemon demonstrates the gospel's ability to break down class distinctions and social stigmas. Onesimus, though legally and culturally subordinate, found equality through faith. Galatians 3:28 affirms, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus." Through conversion, Philemon and Onesimus

experienced the freedom of a fraternal relationship in Christ. On Christian unity, John L. Kachelman, Jr. observes:

We are "blood brothers" today, but in a far different sense than was practised by the African savages. All who are in Christ are united with the blood. We share that blood, and whatever happens to one happens to the others. Let us be thankful for this fellowship. Let us adhere to the Scripture's teachings to protect this fellowship.²⁰

Even in difficult times, it is important to stay connected to the faith community (Heb 10:23-25). Hardship may tempt us to withdraw, but strength comes from ongoing connection to Christ (John 15:1-5) and fellow believers (Ps 92:12-15). Margaret Killingray notes, "Within the fellowship, believers together model and demonstrate their theology."²¹ Paul maintained relationships and reinforced Christian teachings through his letters. Similarly, we should document our personal stories to pass on our faith to future generations.

Paul's life demonstrates spiritual maturity and growth. His example shows that spiritual authority is earned through character, not coercion. Effective leaders appeal to both emotion and reason. Paul's handling of the situation between Philemon and Onesimus highlights his leadership and emotional intelligence. Leaders should earn respect rather than demand compliance. Paul also models conflict resolution: begin with affirmation, address the issue directly, and end with a positive statement.

Believers are called to reconciliation and restoration (2 Cor 5:18-19). Love, forgiveness, and freedom from offence should define every Christian (see John 13:35; Eph 4:32). We must remember our origins, remain humble, and extend grace to others. In times of rising racial and political tension, Christians are called to peacemaking (Matt 5:9), offering a vital opportunity to promote unity in a divided world.

Paul expressed that he had heard of Onesimus' love and faith (v. 5). His statement reveals that our reputation will speak for itself. What is the fruit of our life saying to others? We must be mindful not only of what we do but also of how we treat others, particularly those in the household of faith

¹⁶ M.A. Getty, *Philippians and Philemon: New Testament Message 14* (Delaware: Michael Glazer, 1980), 85.

¹⁷ Onwukeme, 303.

¹⁸ Onwukeme, 303-304.

¹⁹ M. H. Shore, "The Freedom of Three Christians: Paul's Letter to Philemon and the Beginning of a New Age," *Word & World*, 38(4), (2018), 390-397.

²⁰ John Jr. Kachelman, "Brotherly Fellowship Features," http://www.christianlibrary.org/authors/John_L_Kachelman_Jr/philem11.htm accessed October 20, 2025.

²¹ Margaret Killingray, "The Bible, Slavery and Onesimus," *Anvil*, 24(2), (2007), 94.

(Gal 6:10). We don't have to promote ourselves; people will hear of our service (see Neh 4:1).

Our spirituality should not be forfeited in the marketplace. Paul encouraged Philemon to do what is right, despite the potential financial impact. This reveals the motive of our ministry. Our stewardship should be fiscally responsible without compromising our commitment to live out the Great Commandment to love God and our neighbour.

9. Conclusion

The apostle Paul's involvement in the relationship between Philemon and Onesimus offers a transformative model for social justice, rooted in loving-kindness rather than legalism or disruptive change. Rather than issuing a direct decree to abolish slavery, which would have been impractical and destabilising in the Roman context, Paul reframes the relationship through Christian brotherhood.

By appealing to Philemon's conscience rather than his legal obligations, Paul demonstrates a transformative, identity-centred approach. Onesimus is no longer seen as a "runaway slave" but as a "beloved brother" (Philemon v. 16). Paul's offer to pay Onesimus' debts (v. 18-19) shows his willingness to bear the cost of reconciliation, reflecting the Gospel's ethos of self-sacrifice. This is more than a request for charity; it is a subtle yet profound call for equality within the Christian community.

The letter's significance lies in its call for voluntary, internally motivated transformation. Paul does not compel Philemon, but instead elevates the issue from social status to a sacred obligation of love. He establishes a lasting principle: authentic social justice cannot be imposed by external legislation alone; it must arise from internal change and a shift in relationships from ownership to kinship.

While the letter does not abolish slavery, it fundamentally challenges its foundations through a theological critique. The principles of abolition and human dignity are embedded in this concise, personal epistle. Paul's model shows that lasting social justice comes not from coercion, but from recognising others as brothers and sisters. The story of Philemon remains a radical call to let loving-kindness reshape power, privilege, and status.

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