



Forward thinking from Philemon ...

## Paul's Appeal

Interaction with other people is often complicated and challenging. They, regardless of how tough an exterior they present, must be considered as somewhat fragile, and therefore handled with care. The scriptures thus are replete with exhortations on how to have positive interactions with others. Love for the other person is paramount in all communication, as Paul noted in his epistle to the Ephesian brethren, exhorting them to be "speaking the truth in love" (Ephesians 4:15). Words such as *kind* and *patient* come to mind, as well as "look out for the interests of others" (Philippians

2:4). Hence the apostle Paul, as he has a somewhat sensitive point he wants to discuss with his friend and fellow saint Philemon, will make his appeal very carefully, with every due consideration for the predicament and position of this leader in the church in Colossae.

- **No order** — The apostle Paul was a hard charging individual who week after week would enter a synagogue of the Jews to preach, knowing that generally there would be increasing and tremendous hostility toward him as his message developed. The apostle, then, would have no problem approaching his friend and brother in Christ, but note his careful approach in bringing up a delicate subject with Philemon: "Therefore," he begins, drawing upon his earlier true comments upon his relationship with this man, and the listing of the fellow saint's stellar character, "though I have enough confidence in Christ to order you to that which is proper, yet for love's sake I rather appeal to you ..." (Philemon 1:8,9). He could have ordered Philemon to do what he wanted, but such ordering people around really does not work well. Even the Lord, as He works with mankind, appeals to them rather than ordering them; each person has a choice to respond to the love of God, or to refuse and face the consequences. Paul appeals.
- **The proper thing to do** — What is it that the apostle has in mind? He says he could order Philemon to do "that which is proper," but has been very careful in introducing what that is. The problem — if that is what it could be called — is that Onesimus, one of Philemon's slaves, has run away and come to where Paul was, in prison in Rome. While there, Onesimus has become a Christian; Paul is now sending him back to his master, and Paul wants Philemon to forgive and forget the past and welcome Onesimus back. So the apostle chooses his words carefully, and the Holy Spirit has seen fit to have those words recorded for the benefit of all saints in the future. "For love's sake I rather appeal to you," states the apostle, "since I am such a person as Paul, the aged, and now a prisoner of Christ Jesus" (Philemon 1:9). Three bases for his appeal (and this is definitely getting personal!): 1) He's Paul, Philemon's friend; 2) He's now "the aged"; 3) He's a prisoner.
- **For Onesimus** — Now, after properly setting the stage, Paul gets to the delicate point, "I appeal to you for my child, whom I have begotten in my imprisonment, Onesimus, who formerly was useless to you, but now is useful both to you and to me" (Philemon 1:10,11). A run away slave might have been executed, or at least punished severely. Paul called Onesimus his child, having converted the slave when Onesimus tracked him down and found him in one of Rome's prisons.

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The apostle Paul is the one who, inspired by the Holy Spirit, stated, "Therefore if any man is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come" (2 Corinthians 5:17). In effect, Onesimus was a new person as a Christian; it was someone else — now dead — who ran away. So the apostle is appealing to his Christian friend to consider Onesimus in that regard, Onesimus having proven that he really was a changed man. There are certainly some lessons for modern Christians in that point alone!

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