

INTRODUCTION

Would you agree or disagree with this assertion? “*Letter writing is a dying art and a vanishing practice.*” By letter writing I refer to the traditional snail mail letter actually written on paper and inserted into an envelope to which is affixed a stamp and sent by the postal service. I know e-mail and voice mail, plus *Facebook* and text messaging is on the rise. But the demise of letter-writing seems an unfortunate byproduct in these days of electronic communicating.

Example: my grandfather the letter writer

Fortunately the days of the **apostles** were also the days of the **epistles**. Do you know what an epistle is? I think I already told you how a little boy in S. S. once answered the question this way: *an epistle is a female apostle!*

Illustration: *Epistles to an Apostle*

Today we are studying one of the shortest and loveliest letters in the entire NT. Paul’s letter to Philemon is brief, personal and gracious—and his purpose in writing is to ask a favor of his friend and brother in Christ, Philemon.

TEXT.....

OBSERVATIONS

1. Forthright style—witnesses invoked
2. Open door approach—not a demand

CONCLUSIONS

1. Brotherly love: the basis of Paul’s appeal to his brother in Christ... v. 9

“Asking someone **a favor...**”

switch Sundays in the nursery
get the mail, watch the house while you are away on vacation
loan me your lawnmower, car...
donate a kidney

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There is a hierarchy of favors one may do for another or ask of another. And I suppose that there is a correlation factor involved in the asking of favors. The closer you are to someone, the bigger the favor you might ask. Would you agree with that? If so, then the principle might be stated this way. *Relationship determines freedom in favor asking.* If you consider one’s need a second

factor then you might say, “*Relationship plus neediness determines boldness in seeking help.*” Brotherly or sisterly love in Christ ought to free us up to ask for and/or to give help to one another.

2. **Relationships:** Philemon’s opportunity & responsibility—to welcome Onesimus first as a brother and secondly as a former slave.
3. **God’s Providence:** see verses 15-16 (e.g. Joseph)
4. **Gospel Ministry:** Onesimus is *useful*—does that usefulness for ministry outweigh the demands of the law? God’s people together, relating to each other, have to decide such questions.
5. **Fellowship**

Do Christian people relate to each other as “*saints*”? Do they regard each other in light of the faith they share? We already have noted this factor in the asking of favors. Paul writes elsewhere (Gal. 3:28) that “*we no longer regard anyone from a human point of view*” because of the priority of Christian identity. Being in Christ, according to the NT, transcends human social differences.

Communication is a key ingredient in a Christian community that practices showing kindness among its members! Paul, in this letter, is a master communicator.

I’m constantly amazed how often people say thoughtless or ill considered statements that sound mean or heartless. They are not always intended that way. Some people speak before they think. But we do not always give the effort needed to guard our tongues from saying what is received as unkindness. We are slow to give others the benefit of the doubt. Examples: campaign comments, etc.

The primary way of learning to be disciples is by being in contact with others who are disciples. The apostle Paul used letter-writing to stay in contact with his friends, with his children in the faith. We need to keep our young disciples and our new disciples in close contact with those who can show us how to live. We do not know what to do (like Philemon) until we are taught and trained and encouraged.

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Paul may seem bigger than life – but **Philemon** and **Onesimus** were ordinary Christians whose examples shine and illumine the path for us. The name, Onesimus, shows up a century later as a *bishop*. It’s not the same guy—but the name obviously lived on with some fame. I can only guess that this original Onesimus amounted to something pretty good to lend his name to the honor roll of church history.

The story of Philemon and Onesimus is what the gospel looks like in application on a Tuesday in a world that included the slave market. It is a picture of relationships working through challenges from the perspective of Christian love.

Rights—sure, Philemon had **rights**. He was entitled to have his slave back and to punish him for desertion and thievery. **Penalty** for wrongdoing—absolutely; Onesimus owed his Master for the wrong done according to first century standards.

And Paul the apostle does not swoop in and set aside these requirements of law and culture. Neither does he apply the provisions of grace unilaterally. Instead he *appeals* to Philemon. He does not demand that the slave owner release his slave. But, at the same time, the appeal is more than a suggestion. It is a strong appeal that is communicated in a way that Philemon's Christian friends overhear. It may be that the entire church at Colossae knows about this issue. Paul communicates personally but not privately. There is community and accountability and mutuality inserted into the situation without the apostle insisting on any particular outcome. He writes to Philemon with grace and humor and with forthright reasoning. The letter is an ingenious combination of Paul's forcefulness and gentleness.

Do you see any help here for your life? Any hints about how to ask for a favor? Any modeling about how to confront a Christian brother or sister with that delicate combination of grit and grace?

Remember that Paul was writing to a friend. He had a relationship with Philemon. He is not a distant apostle invoking his credentials and using his clout like a club. He knows this man and he has earned the right to say these things.

Example: Aidan and King Oswald in Northumbria (horse story, Anglo-Saxon)

Does it make a difference to work out problems and issues and ask favors with grit and grace out of a matrix of Christ-centered relationships? Yes, it makes all the difference in the world!

Philemon 1:1-25

1:1-7

Paul, a *prisoner* (**in prison at Rome**) of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, To Philemon our dear friend and fellow worker, to Apphia our sister, to Archippus our fellow *soldier* and to the **church** that meets in your home: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. I always thank my God as I remember you in my prayers, because I hear about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints. I pray that you may be active in sharing your faith, so that you will have a full understanding of every good thing we have in Christ. Your love has given me great joy and encouragement, because you, brother, have refreshed the hearts of the saints.

1:8-9

Therefore, although in Christ I could be bold and order you to do what you ought to do, yet I **appeal** to you on the basis of **love**. I then, as Paul – an old man and now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus –

1:10-14

I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, who became **my son** while I was in chains. Formerly he was *useless* to you, but now he has become *useful* both to you and to me. I am sending him – who is my very heart – back to you. I would have liked to keep him with me so that he could take your place in helping me while I am in chains for the gospel. But I did not want to do anything without your *consent*, so that any *favor* you do will be *spontaneous* and not *forced*.

1:15

Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back for good –

1:16

no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear **brother**. He is very dear to me but even dearer to you, both as a man and as a brother in the Lord.

1:17

So if you consider me a *partner*, *welcome* him as you would welcome me.

RECONCILIATION

1:18

If he has done you any wrong or owes you anything, charge it to me.

RESTITUTION

1:19

I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand. I will pay it back – not to mention that you **owe** me your very self.

1:20

I do wish, brother, that I may have some *benefit* from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in Christ.

1:21

Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I ask.

1:22

And one thing more: Prepare a guest room for me, because I hope to be restored to you in answer to your prayers.

1:23-24

Epaphras, my fellow prisoner (**Paul's convert in Ephesus—prob carried gospel to Colossae**) in Christ Jesus sends you greetings. And so do *Mark*, *Aristarchus*, *Demas* and *Luke*, (**all mentioned in Colossians**) my fellow workers.

(Tychicus & Onesimus carried Colossians to Colossae & Laodicea; probably also delivered Letter to Philemon –Tychicus delivered Ephesians also. All three letters composed in 60 AD.)

1:25

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.