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Philemon abbreviated, **NLT**.

This letter is from Paul, a prisoner for preaching the Good News about Christ Jesus.

I am writing to Philemon, our beloved co-worker,² and to our sister Apphia, and to our fellow soldier Archippus, and to the church that meets in your house.

³ May God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ give you grace and peace.

⁴ I always thank my God when I pray for you, Philemon,⁵ because I keep hearing about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all of God's people.⁶ And I am praying that you will put into action the generosity that comes from your faith as you understand and experience all the good things we have in Christ.⁷ Your love has given me much joy and comfort, my brother, for your kindness has often refreshed the hearts of God's people.

⁸ I am boldly asking a favor of you. I could demand it in the name of Christ because it is the right thing for you to do.⁹ But because of our love, consider this as a request from me—Paul, an old man and now also a prisoner for the sake of Christ Jesus.

¹⁰ I appeal to you to show kindness to my child, Onesimus. I became his father in the faith while here in prison.¹¹ Onesimus hasn't been of much use to you in the past, but now he is very useful to both of us.¹² I am sending him back to you, and with him comes my own heart.

¹³ I wanted to keep him here with me while I am in these chains for preaching the Good News, and he would have helped me on your behalf.¹⁴ But I didn't want to do anything without your consent.¹⁵ It seems you lost Onesimus for a little while so that you could have him back forever.¹⁶ He is no longer like a slave to you. He is more than a slave, for he is a beloved brother, especially to me. Now he will mean much more to you, both as a man and as a brother in the Lord.

¹⁷ So if you consider me your partner, welcome him as you would welcome me.¹⁸ If he has wronged you in any way or owes you anything, charge it to me.

²⁰ Yes, my brother, please do me this favor for the Lord's sake.

²¹ I am confident as I write this letter that you will do what I ask and even more!²² One more thing—please prepare a guest room for me, for I am hoping that God will answer your prayers and let me return to you soon.

²⁵ May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.

Boundless empathy.

I have included almost the entire Book of Philemon as our reading today. I have edited some pieces of it away, but I wanted to leave it fairly intact so that we could take a close look at it. In the century after the death of Paul the great evangelist, people began collecting the letters that were thought to have been written by Paul. This is long before the official canon, the Bible was created. In that first century, there were two collections that were being passed around. The first was called “Paul’s Letters to Churches” and the second was called “Paul’s letters to Individuals”. But this second name was a bit of a misnomer. One example is the letter to Philemon; while yes, it was in large part a letter specifically addressed to one person, Philemon, it was in truth written to a much larger group. This turns out to be very important when interpreting the letter. Here is the line in question: *I am writing to Philemon, our beloved co-worker, ² and to our sister Apphia, and to our fellow soldier Archippus, and to the church that meets in your house.* Here’s why this is so critical. The entire point of the letter is to get Philemon to allow a slave he owned, Onesimus, to be set free in order to serve the Church by working with Paul. But clearly, this letter was also seen by a woman named Apphia and a man named Archippus, and to a church that met in Philemon’s house. So, Paul is using a little leverage here: If Philemon tells Paul no, then Philemon’s faith family

is going to know about it. But let's step back and look at this letter, nominally addressed to an individual, but clearly seen by the Christians in the life of a man who was rich enough to own a slave and a house large enough to host a church.

Philemon is the shortest of Paul's surviving letters. In the Greek, it contains only 335 words. Here is what the letter says. Philemon, a wealthy man from Colossae apparently became a Christian due to Paul's preaching; he owes his spiritual life to Paul. Paul was off on one of his missionary trips when one of Philemon's slaves, Onesimus, apparently stole money from Philemon and ran off. Onesimus traveled to where Paul had been imprisoned because of his missionary work. We think Paul was imprisoned either in Rome or in Ephesus at this time. But Paul was able to keep doing his evangelistic work via outside helpers – like Onesimus, who has become a believer because of Paul. In the letter, Paul makes three requests. The first is for Philemon to not punish Onesimus for stealing. Second, Paul seems to be asking Philemon to free Onesimus so that he can return to Paul and continue helping with the mission to spread the faith. Third, Paul says that he is going to come and visit Philemon; clearly Paul thinks he is going to be set free from imprisonment, and he wants Philemon to prepare a room for him, it seems. By saying that he is going to visit, Paul is adding a little more umph to his implied threat of outing Philemon to his entire church if he does not free the slave.

The letter to Philemon, by the way, is very widely considered to be authentic. We can date it to being in existence at least as early as about the year 150 A.D. There is also another known fragment of a letter believed to be written by Paul where Paul clearly refers to this letter to Philemon. This letter gives us tremendous insight into Paul's state of mind as a follower of Christ. Remember that when Paul was known as Saul, he was a successful, brutal man who hunted down followers of Christ and sent them to be imprisoned or killed. He was a Roman citizen. He was very much a part of the establishment, not a poor outsider like the Apostles or Jesus himself. Paul's change of mind when he became a believer was clearly very deep. Slavery was an accepted practice in the Roman Empire. Slavery wasn't based on ethnicity. The most common source of slaves were prisoners of war. Slaves in the Roman Empire were paid a modest income, which they often saved up and used to buy their freedom. A very large percentage of slaves became free before they were thirty. They were also quite likely to receive a Roman education so that they could be more useful. Slaves were a critical part of the labor force. They rowed in the galleys of Roman ships; they worked mines; they also managed land for wealthy owners; they often held high places in government. Slaves were legal property. Slave owners could do anything they wanted to their slaves without worrying about any kind of punishment. Notice that Paul is asking a lot of Philemon, given the

context of his society. He wants Philemon to forget about the money that was lost and to forget about the lost labor that happened when Onesimus ran off. Paul offers to cover the cost of Onesimus' escape, but we all suspect that Philemon would never actually ask his spiritual advisor, who is a prisoner himself, for money. Paul says that as a believer, he has every right to order another believer, Philemon, to forgive Onesimus so that Onesimus can serve the Church, but Paul wants Philemon to do this voluntarily. This is how Paul puts it: *Onesimus hasn't been of much use to you in the past, but now he is very useful to both of us.* What readers of English translations of the Greek New Testament don't know is that Paul is making a play on words. He says that Onesimus wasn't very useful in the past, but now he is very useful – the name Onesimus means “useful”. Notice that Paul isn't saying that slavery is wrong. What he's saying is the Onesimus isn't just some random slave. Paul is telling Philemon to embrace Onesimus as a fellow follower of Christ. Paul writes this about Onesimus: ¹⁶ *He is no longer like a slave to you, for he is a beloved brother, especially to me. Now he will mean much more to you, both as a man and as a brother in the Lord. Welcome him as you would welcome me.*

Let's look at the very first line of this letter: *This letter is from Paul, a prisoner for preaching the Good News about Christ Jesus.* Notice that Paul opens up by identifying with Philemon. Paul makes it clear that he is a prisoner, that he is not a

free man. In the Roman Empire, a prisoner who was a Roman citizen had a far more rights than one who was not a Roman citizen. Paul was presumably also very influential, and the Roman authorities were motivated, at least at this point, to go a little easy on him. So, Paul was allowed outside contact. He could write letters. He could have visitors and thereby commission people to help him evangelize. In the letter, Paul implies that he will be freed. We believe that he was executed in Rome in the end, but he was apparently freed after writing the letter to Philemon.

Here is the catch to this letter, from the perspective of a modern reader. Paul does not condemn slavery. So, I'm not going to try to draw this out as a lesson from this letter, that Paul somehow declared slavery to be evil. Many people have tried to suggest that since Paul is asking Philemon to accept Onesimus as a brother in Christ, and to do it voluntarily, not because Paul is ordering him, that Paul is essentially saying that slavery runs counter to being a follower of Christ. However, I think that Paul is a man of his times. He accepts the extra benefits he receives as a citizen, and he uses them repeatedly during his missionary efforts. He seems in this letter to accept the institution of slavery, which was part of the ancient world across a broad region, and not just the Roman Empire, and which predated the Roman Empire. From the perspective of a modern reader, maybe that's too bad. We would have loved this letter to have unequivocally declared the institution of

slavery to be evil. The letter does not say this. What it does say is that Paul, as a follower of Christ and no longer a man who carries out the brutal mission of the Roman Empire and of the religious leaders, now sees himself in Onesimus. He shows tremendous empathy for a runaway slave, a man with virtually no rights, a man with no freedom, a man who, if it weren't for Paul, would probably have been brutally punished. Paul is an incredible character in Scripture. He goes through amazing changes in his lifetime. When he meets Jesus on the road to Damascus, is blinded, and hears the voice of the Lord, a lifelong series of changes begin to unfold. This is one of them – feeling a deep sense of empathy for a man who is someone else's property. It was something that Paul made sure that other believers learned. In his letter Paul tells Philemon this: ¹⁷ *If you consider me your partner, welcome Onesimus as you would welcome me*, and by partner, he means fellow believer.

Many of us today are very upset about what is going on in Ukraine. Because they are being attacked by the remnants of the Soviet Union, and because we all know about Hitler and how he led his blitzkrieg attack on Poland, a neighbor of Ukraine, we easily identify with Ukrainians. This is a key reason why the Russian attack on Ukraine hits us so hard, causes so much anxiety within us. But we also know that there is astonishing poverty, and out and out starvation, in much of Africa; the Sudan, in particular, has millions of people who are internally displaced

and largely without food. We know that there are homeless encampments all over the U.S., and that many of these people at one point saw themselves as being just like us, with jobs and homes – until an economic crisis took it all away. Others of them are mentally ill and are ignored by our society. We know that while we proudly declare that we are going to cut carbon emissions, the batteries we use in countless devices and in electric cars contain precious metals that are mined by children and virtual slaves. We know that there is a dictator in North Korea building up a nuclear arsenal while his own people literally starve. We know that a Syrian dictator has bombed his own people back to the stone age. We know that Myanmar, a Buddhist country, has displaced its Muslim population, sending at least a million people into horrific refugee camps in Bangladesh. We know that the people of Afghanistan live under the brutal rule of a fundamentalist theocracy and that their standard of living has plummeted. We know that in our own country, people are right this minute struggling to come back from floods and fires, and that many millions of people live on a desperately low minimum wage. I'll stop there.

We are Christians. During our lives, we go through a similar process that Paul the Evangelist went through. We are not rigid people who do not continue to evolve. We have our eyes and our ears open. We do what Paul does in his letter to Philemon: we feel empathy for others. For my part, I feel a lot like Paul. He was

empathetic, but he had his limitations. I would like to see myself as empathetic, but I enjoy the goods that I can buy cheaply because near economic slaves in Asia fabricate them for me. I wonder just who is responsible for the raw materials that went into my iPhone and what kind of life its makers have – compared to me. But our goal is to be as empathetic as possible. Consider this from Romans 12, where Paul tells us how to live ethically, where we live like true Christians, not hypocrites:

⁹ Don't just pretend to love others. Really love them. Hate what is wrong. Hold tightly to what is good. ¹⁰ Love each other with genuine affection. ¹³ When God's people are in need, be ready to help them. Always be eager to practice hospitality. ¹⁴ Bless those who persecute you. Don't curse them; pray that God will bless them. ¹⁵ Be happy with those who are happy, and weep with those who weep.

Be happy with those who are happy, and weep with those who weep. That's empathy. Paul lived in a society where slavery had existed across a broad area since at least 3,500 B.C. It was a very ingrained institution. We can fault him for not taking a strong stand against it. We can certainly fault ourselves for being products of our own culture. But we are commanded as Christians to push our empathy to the limits, to have boundless empathy. Please pray with me.

God, inspire us to fight the ways that our culture has programmed us. Let us be happy with those who are happy and weep with those who weep – even if they are very different from us, even if it means making major changes within ourselves. This is a tall order, one that even Paul struggled with. But it is our desire. Amen.