

# ***THE GOSPEL OF CHRIST***

SPREADING THE SOUL-SAVING MESSAGE OF JESUS

## **PHILEMON**

### **Introduction by narrator accompanied by a cappella singing:**

*THE GOSPEL OF CHRIST*. Spreading the soul-saving message of Jesus. And now, Timothy Sparks and Ben Bailey.

### **Timothy Sparks:**

"I thank my God, making mention of you always in my prayers" (Philem. 4). I'm Timothy Sparks.

### **Ben Bailey:**

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The Book of Philemon is about mending broken relationships. This is appropriate, because even Christians sometimes have differences between or among themselves. We must be willing to stick in there and make those relationships work.

### **Timothy Sparks:**

This is not always an easy thing to do, however. Are you familiar with mending a broken fence? Sometimes, in order to do that, you actually have to get down on your hands and knees to accomplish it. Paul, in the Book of Philemon, is trying to mend a broken relationship between one individual by the name of Philemon, and another individual by the name of Onesimus. In the first three verses, Paul seizes the initiative. There is a practical lesson here. When a broken relationship occurs, I must take the initiative. I shouldn't wait for the other person to do something. If you have a disagreement with someone, don't wait for them to come to you. Rather, you go to them. It is interesting that in the

Book of Philemon, it was not Paul who was “at odds” with Philemon. Paul was trying to mend a broken relationship between Philemon and Onesimus, because apparently Philemon felt that he had been wronged by Onesimus. In order to mend broken relationships, we cannot be the type of people who hold grudges, and who wait for someone else to come to **us** to apologize. **We** need to seize the initiative. We need to be peace-makers. In Matthew 5:9, Jesus pronounced a great blessing on those who are peace-makers. Paul wrote in Ephesians 4:3 that we are to “endeavor to keep the peace of the Spirit in the bond of peace.”

### **Ben Bailey:**

I’ve known people who were Christians, and who were members of the same congregation, who wouldn’t even speak to each other, and who remained angry with one another for years. This isn’t the way God wants things to be between Christians. We do indeed need to take the initiative. In verses 4-7 of this book, we learn that we actually ought to be thankful for the other person. In verse 4, Paul says, “I thank my God, making mention of you always in my prayers, hearing of your love and faith which you have toward the Lord Jesus and toward all the saints.” Why was Paul thankful? He was thankful because he had heard of Philemon’s love and faith. Paul uses a bit of psychology here. He knows that the things he has to say to Philemon are going to be difficult for him to hear, and that they could be taken the wrong way. So, he tells Philemon right up front that he’s thankful he and Paul are brothers in Christ, that he is thankful they are both faithful Christians, and that he is praying for him so that these difficulties can be solved. Paul wants Philemon to know that he is praying for him to remain faithful, for him to remain strong, and for God to give him wisdom. Paul lists several things for which he is thankful. First, he’s thankful for Philemon as an individual. Second, he is thankful for Philemon’s faith. He is thankful that Philemon stands firm on the Word of God, and that the winds of false doctrine and ungodliness have not removed him from his place as a faithful Christian. Faith, of course, is an obedient trust in God. Hebrews 11:6 says that “without faith, it is impossible to please God.” Paul was thankful for Philemon’s faith, which is “the victory that overcomes the world (1 Jn. 5:4). Third, Paul was thankful for Philemon’s love for the saints.

### **Timothy Sparks:**

Paul is grateful for all of Philemon’s good qualities, and stresses the concept of “faith in love.” Paul commended Philemon on his great faith. In order to mend broken relationships, we must be able to compliment others for their good traits. Paul didn’t begin by telling Philemon that he was going to rebuke him, or that he needed to repent. Rather, Paul was gentle, and made sure that Philemon knew how thankful Paul was for Philemon’s place in the kingdom. Paul goes on to tell Philemon that he had great joy and consolation in Philemon’s love, “because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed by you, brother” (vs. 7). Paul wanted Philemon to know that the encouragement he had provided through his faith for other Christians had not gone unnoticed. Paul’s comments weren’t insincere or fake. He meant every word he said to Philemon. Paul knew that in order to mend a broken relationship, he had to take the initiative. Sometimes, we have to “take pen in hand” (just as Paul did) to say, “I want to resolve our differences.

### **Ben Bailey:**

In order to mend broken relationships, we are going to have to appeal to something higher than ourselves—Christianity. The only real way to resolve our differences is by an appeal to our mutual Christian principles. This is what Paul did in regard to the situation between Philemon and Onesimus. But before we proceed, we need to provide some background information concerning the dispute between these two brothers in Christ. Onesimus was a bondservant to Philemon. He was not a slave. This was not a situation akin to the type of slavery that once existed in America in days past. Rather, Onesimus had sold himself into servitude. He had made an agreement with Philemon to serve him for a certain number of years in order to provide an income. For some reason, Onesimus had run away. He did not have the right to leave. He was bound by his agreement of servitude. He had wronged Philemon by what he had done. Somehow (perhaps by the providence of God?), Onesimus ends up coming into contact with Paul (who is in chains in Rome), and becomes a Christian. Thus, Paul is able to write to Philemon about “my son Onesimus, whom I have begotten while in my chains, who once was unprofitable to you, but now is profitable to you and to me” (vss. 10-11). Paul’s appeal is based on Christian principles. Can’t you imagine how this letter must have affected Philemon? He learned not only that his servant had been found, but that he also had become a Christian. Paul’s point is, “Yes, Philemon, I know that Onesimus wronged you. But look at the bigger picture. Your servant is now your brother in Christ.”

### **Timothy Sparks:**

It’s interesting that the name Onesimus means “profitable” or “beneficial.” Thus, Paul is saying that Philemon’s servant is now worthy of his name, because by becoming a Christian, he has become profitable—to Paul, and to Philemon. Onesimus will end up doing something far more beneficial than he would if he had remained with Philemon. Paul therefore appeals to Philemon to voluntarily accept Onesimus back as a brother in Christ. This is what we might refer to as “tact in contact.” Paul, through his letter, is having contact with Philemon, but is tactful in what he says. Paul doesn’t want Philemon to feel as if this is something Philemon **has** to do just because Paul is an apostle. Paul wants this to be something that Philemon does because of his Christian character. In verses 15 and 16, Paul makes an observation that is intended to help Philemon see how this has all worked out for the best for everyone involved. He says of Onesimus, “Perhaps he departed for a while for this purpose, that you might receive him forever, 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.” Paul’s point, of course, is that while Onesimus was wrong in running away from his obligation to Philemon, perhaps through the providence of God, he ended up coming to Paul, who was able to convert him to Christ. Paul, even though he was an apostle, could not state with certainty that the events that transpired were definitely due to God’s providence. We today should follow his example. If we see things in our lives that we “think” might be due to God’s providence (such as finding a mate), we should be content to say, as Paul did, that “perhaps” this is God’s providence. We know from God’s Word that He is alive, and that He works through providence in our lives. We may not know **how** God does that, but we can know **that** He does it. Paul writes a very endearing letter to Philemon, in which he appeals to the possible providence of God, as well as to Philemon’s well-known Christian character.

### **Ben Bailey:**

In verses 17 through 19, Paul acknowledges that, in mending broken relationships, there may be a price to pay. Paul says, “If then you count me as a partner, receive him as you

would me. But if he has wronged you, or owes anything, put that on my account. I, Paul, am writing with my own hand. I will repay—not to mention to you that you owe me even your own self besides.” Paul is asking Philemon not to say, “But I’ve been wronged. I’m ‘owed’ something as a result.” Rather, he wants Philemon to understand that Christianity is a religion of forgiveness. If we have been wronged by someone, if they are willing to repent and make it right, then we must forgive them. Paul wants Philemon to know that if there is any price that must be paid to mend this broken relationship, then Philemon should “charge it to Paul’s account,” as it were. Too many times when we’ve been mistreated, we hold onto it and turn it into a grudge. This is wrong. Sometimes, we must “pay the price” of letting go of our stubborn pride. I truly believe that pride is one of the main causes of division among Christians today. We get to thinking that we are better than others, that we have been mistreated, and that we deserved better than what we got. Thus, our feelings are hurt. We need to humble ourselves before God. We need to get rid of our pride. We need to take the initiative and pay the price. We must appeal to the other person on the basis of Christian principles. Maybe someone stole money from you. Or maybe you were in a business relationship where someone didn’t “do right” by you. What if the person who mistreated you became a Christian. Would you be willing to forgive them then? If they were unable to repay you, could you **still** forgive them? Could you “pay the price”? Paul told Philemon, “You owe yourself to me!” Couldn’t Jesus say the same thing to each and every one of us today? Who paid the price for our salvation? Christ did. Then, don’t we owe ourselves to Him? Oh, yes, we owe Him, because He paid a debt that we could never pay. Nor do we have any way to repay Him—except by remaining faithful to Him and to His Word. The lesson here is that if I, as a Christian, have been wronged, I should be willing to pay the price and be forgiving.

### **Timothy Sparks:**

In verses 18 and 19, Paul says that he is willing to pay Philemon whatever it takes to get him to accept Onesimus back into his service. At the same time, however, Paul wants Philemon to understand that he owes Paul as well. Why? Because Paul had taught Philemon the Gospel, just as he had Onesimus. Paul’s point was that these two debts ought to be able to “cancel each other out.” In verses 21 and 22, we learn another important lesson about mending broken relationships. That lesson is this: We must be willing to trust others to do the right thing. Paul writes, “Having confidence in your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say. But, meanwhile, also prepare a guest room for me, for I trust that through your prayers I shall be granted to you.” Paul was saying to Philemon, “I have confidence that you will do not only what I’m asking, but that you will even do much more than that.” Paul wants Philemon to know that he trusts him to do the right thing. I doubt seriously that Philemon ever sent Paul an invoice for receiving back Onesimus. This is exactly the type of love that we as Christians should have for one another. When we encounter a broken relationship, we shouldn’t lay all the blame at the feet of someone else. Rather, we should do everything within our power to mend that relationship. Part of that will involve trusting others to do the right thing. Paul expressed his confidence that Philemon would do what Paul had requested, and that God would work everything out in the end.

### **Ben Bailey:**

In Matthew 5, Jesus said, “If you bring your gift to the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar, and go your way. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift. Agree

with your adversary quickly, while you are on the way with him, lest your adversary deliver you to the judge, the judge hand you over to the officer, and you be thrown into prison” (vss. 23-25). Jesus’ point was that we should deal with our problems quickly—before they get bigger and become permanent. Let’s make Jesus’ lesson practical for us today. Suppose you’ve had a problem in the past with a brother or sister, and you regret that the situation remains as it is. What can you do to fix this problem? There are five things we learn from the Book of Philemon that can help us. Here they are.

1. If you are trying to mend a broken relationship, **you** have to take the initiative. But you may say, “Yes, but **I** was the one who was wronged.” Philemon was the one who had been wronged, yet Paul asked him to be the one to take the initiative and forgive Onesimus. Maybe a brother or sister in Christ said something unkind to you. You need to go talk to that brother or sister. Perhaps it’s the case that they feel as badly about it as you do, but that they are just a little more prideful. Or, perhaps they don’t understand the teaching of the Book of Philemon about how they need to take the initiative. Then **you** need to take the initiative! Go to the person, tell them how you are feeling, and ask them to sit down and work it out with you.

2. If you want to mend a broken relationship, you need to remember to be thankful for the other person in the relationship. Think about some of the person’s good characteristics. Maybe they are a person who knows the Bible well. Maybe they are a very benevolent individual. Maybe they are a person who does many good works and helps many other people. Concentrate on the positive aspects of the person’s life, pray about it, and be thankful for them.

### **Timothy Sparks:**

3. You need to appeal to Christian principles. If we cannot appeal to someone else’s Christian character, then we have nothing to which we can appeal as common ground between the two of us. We can remind them that division is not good, and that it is not what God would want.

4. We must be people who are willing to pay the price to mend the broken relationship. We must not let a problem fester. We must do whatever it takes, because our lives are too short, and eternity is too long. If we hate someone in this life, and do not resolve that hatred within our hearts, we will pay a terrible price in eternity for harboring that hatred. Wouldn’t it be far better for us to humble ourselves in the here and now, pay the price, and not let our pride get in the way of our going to Heaven? We should have the attitude that Paul had when he told Philemon, “If Onesimus has wronged you, and owes you, just put that on my account.”

### **Ben Bailey:**

5. We must be willing to trust others to do the right thing. Paul told Philemon that he had confidence that he would do the right thing. What an encouragement that must have been to Philemon! However, I would like to stop and think for just a moment about what it is that causes Christians to divide. Surely, if we were to make a list of all the things that cause us problems, at the top of that list would be the word “pride.” What was Satan’s problem in Genesis 3? From 1 Timothy 3:7, we learn that it was pride. Sometimes, we, too, think better of ourselves than we ought to. Sometimes, we think that others ought to think more of us and less of themselves. Is it possible that pride becomes a problem for us because we as Christians sometimes don’t understand what love is all about? When

Jesus commanded us to love others, what did He mean? He meant that we should learn to love others above ourselves. Aren't Christians going to be the ones who spend eternity together? How can we get to Heaven and love a brother or sister, if we can't even love them here and now? Perhaps some of our problems come from a lack of Bible knowledge. Maybe we just don't know the Bible like we ought to. What if someone comes to us in a genuine effort to help us by pointing out something that we are doing wrong in our lives? How should we react? If they are right, and if our actions are not in line with biblical teaching, then we need to abandon our pride, humble ourselves before God, and repent. We also should thank the person for coming to us, for appealing to Christian principles, and for being willing to pay the price to help us.

**Timothy Sparks:**

The most important relationship that needs to be mended is our relationship with our God. If you were to die today, would you die in a right relationship with God and be able to stand before Him in good conscience on the Day of Judgment? You do not have to be separated from God for all eternity. You can mend your relationship with Him by believing in His Son Jesus and by repenting of your sins as you change your heart and your actions. You then can confess that Christ is God's Son, and be baptized into Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. After that, you can continue to live a faithful life, and enjoy Heaven with Him forever. We urge you to conform your will to the will of God.

**Narrator accompanied by a cappella singing:**

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## STUDY QUESTIONS FOR PHILEMON

1. What is the main theme of the Book of Philemon?
2. Why were Philemon and Onesimus “at odds”?
3. Paul was trying to play the part of “peacemaker” between two brethren who found themselves in a disagreement with one another. What did Jesus have to say about this in Matthew 5?
4. If we find ourselves in a disagreement with someone else, what is the first thing we should do to resolve that disagreement?
5. Paul says that even if we disagree with another person, we still should be thankful for that person. Why? What is the purpose of this command?
6. As Paul approached Philemon through the letter he wrote to him, he used “tact in contact.” What is meant by that phrase?
7. Apparently, Philemon’s love and faith were well known among Christians. As a result, something had happened to those Christians. According to verse 7, what was that “something”?
8. If two Christians find themselves in a disagreement, they must find a common ground upon which they can resolve that disagreement. According to Paul, what is that common ground?
9. What does the name Onesimus mean? How does the meaning of the name play into Paul’s comments in verse 11?
10. According to Paul’s comments in verse 15, how “certain” can Christians be that specific events in their lives were due to God’s providence?
11. What is frequently the primary reason for disagreements between Christians?
12. Why did Paul feel as if Philemon “owed” him something?
13. Why did Jesus urge us to “agree with our adversary quickly” (Mt. 5:25)?
14. If we want to mend a broken relationship, there are times when we must trust the other party to do something. What is that “something”?
15. What are three possible reasons for disagreements between Christians?
16. This lesson teaches that in order to mend a broken relationship, we may have to “pay a price.” What might that price be in certain instances?
17. Where was Paul when he met and converted Onesimus? How did that factor into his comment that “perhaps” Onesimus departed from Philemon “for a while for a purpose”?