

## Books of the Bible Series

# Philemon

## “The Manipulator”

Rod Hagan

7-21-24

### Cellulitis

Many of you know that I was in the hospital last week with something called cellulitis and many of you visited. Lee Sommitz (who is a pharmacist) came and quizzed the nurse about what antibiotics I was on and possible alternatives because I reacted to the first. He was helpful and I found this refreshing. My good friend Wayne came and gave me a hard time like a good friend. Bob came and we swapped some old guy stories, Sue came and prayed on her knees over me and anointed my foot with oil which really lifted my heart. The McCulloughs came and Ellen made some paper flowers and gave me a hand-made card. Aaron works in food services and called me to make sure my food was good: you all came together and offered your gifts as a community and blessed me greatly.

### Manipulation

Philemon is one of Paul’s most fascinating letters: it’s not about in-depth theology but it’s more personal, addressed to Philemon and wife and son. He writes it from prison in Rome.

When you read it, you can almost think it’s manipulative: actually, the JOY of manipulation. I actually hate doing things that I do out of pressure.

### Mr. Wonders

I was a young teen and Mr. Wonders asked me to accompany him to an “old folks home” on a Sunday afternoon where we would talk about Scripture. It was smelly and dirty and he wanted me to go every Sunday with him. He wouldn’t take NO for an answer: he told me I had a wonderful voice that needed to be used and that I had amazing insights into Scripture. He told me I wasn’t using the gifts God gave or being Christlike unless I went with him and furthermore, he told me that no one would visit me when I was in a rest home. I was squirming: I told myself I didn’t care if anyone visited me when I was old. Despite all my objections, my parents had me ready at 2:30 every Sunday afternoon. This was how I got my start in ministry, preaching to a bunch of people with blank stares and seemingly unable to focus on anything. Maybe nothing has changed in all these years.

By the way, this experience was really good and necessary for me. I ended up really loving the old folks: I would watch their eyes light up at the music and they treated me like a grandson.

Still, I was manipulated. Manipulation is about trading power: you can also manipulate people with tears and weakness. It happens in many ways: it’s about gaining power and trading on the

power imbalances. I was a shy 13 year old kid and Mr. Wonders was a respected elder: of course he won; I didn't have a chance.

## Paul, Philemon, and Onesimus

When I read Philemon, I can't help but laugh at Paul who urges (manipulates) Philemon to take back his runaway slave Onesimus using flattery and appeals to duty. Paul had previously led Philemon and his slave Onesimus to Christ. Onesimus ran away and recently had been serving Paul in prison.

Both men were precious to Paul: it puts him in a quandary in a real-life ministry situation. We don't know why Onesimus had run away from Philemon. Maybe he stole something (Paul said he would pay whatever he owed him). The relationship between master and slave was broken. At this point, Philemon had certain rights as the owner of Onesimus and even could put him to death. If he returned, Onesimus would be putting himself in mortal danger.

We don't know much about Onesimus but his name means "useful." Paul does a word-play around that name: he says he was once useless and now could be useful. It's possible Onesimus was a fellow prisoner or a regular visitor who provided food for Paul. In prisons then, people could bring you food and clothes. Whatever the case, Paul loved both of them and he wanted to have them reconciled. But more than that, he wanted a complete change in their relationship: he wanted them to become brothers rather than slave/owner.

We don't have any idea about how audacious this concept was: Rome was built on slavery and there were classes and statuses that made this kind of thing unheard of. Historically, Rome conquered people and enslaved them: this was their cultural expectation. I don't want to make light of this but it wasn't always horrible. Often, the owners provided well and the slaves were gifted and skilled people that were used by the Romans. However, they were still slaves.

Paul turns all this on its head with his expectation that the slave and his master would become brothers. Notice how he does this:

### Paul's Manipulative Tactics

Paul butters up Philemon and how thankful he is for their relationship and his love. He butters both sides of the toast. I think it's good to do this *without making stuff up*. **We should tell each other how wonderful we are:** it's easy to be critical but hard to be complimentary. We should publicly acknowledge the good in others. I am critical instead: I think the worst things initially. We see the bad first: but we are called to see the best in each other. Do we do this? Or do we make lots of judgments?

1. **Appeal to Authority:** Paul reminds Philemon that he could just order to take Onesimus back. There is a weird thing in our culture: we are opposed to authority. When I retired, I looked back and wished I had preached more about **submission**. Our culture tells us NOT to be submissive. But godly submission to authority is crucial. Paul had the authority to just ask him to do this. Eric and Mark are elders who can just tell you

to do things. You can rebel and refuse: but there is something really powerful about submitting to what they say in that it relieves you of responsibility. This is why we should not want to be elders quickly. That is why elders are hesitant to ask much.

2. **Appeal to Love** Paul wants this brotherly relationship to be Philemon's idea: it's another word play because Philemon's name means "loving affection." Paul wants him to be motivated out of his affection and love for Onesimus. By the way, you can't go wrong when you are motivated by love, when love is your passion. So when you deal with each other, act out of love. Paul wants this for Philemon.
  
3. **Appeal to Age**: Paul says he is old. I like this: I'm going to be 72 soon and I would say it's fun to be old: you get things that you don't have when you're young. You have gravitas: people defer to you, even hold the door open for you. This gives Paul respect and power; Paul has a tender heart and he wants Philemon to recognize how difficult it is to send Onesimus back to Philemon, not only because of the physical danger but because Paul has found the useless man useful.
  
4. **Appeal to Something Greater**. Paul pleads with Philemon to take Onesimus back, not just as a slave but as a partner. This is a key word where we get **koinonia** (deep intimate community). Paul says Onesimus is his partner. When I was in the hospital, I felt you were in this together with me. It felt incredibly intimate and wonderful. This is what koinonia is all about. Paul is calling us as a church into a deep partnership. He recognizes that there has been some kind of loss, probably money, and he says he will pay for it. That is a bold thing for Paul to say: where was Paul going to get the money from prison?
  
5. **Appeal to Gratefulness**: Paul claims Philemon owes his life to Paul: one of the most manipulative statements in the Bible! We owe each other our very selves: we lay down our lives for each other. We are invited to do this! Paul is confident that Philemon will do the right thing and we don't know how it turns out. It's likely it worked out beautifully but the point is that Paul would do way more than was asked.
  
6. **Appeal to High Expectations** This is interesting: Paul has extremely high expectations of Philemon. He assumes he will go against his Roman culture and call his former slave his brother. Do you assume people will do really good things? Or do you doubt anyone will come through for you?

## Summary

There are two major themes in this letter which make us rethink everything we tend to think about power:

### Partnership

Look at the people around you. They aren't your enemies and people who make you angry, ignore, or struggle with. They are your partners. They are in this with you. Is this true? This is Paul's invitation: to be partners with each other. A corollary is equality: Onesimus and Philemon are equals. Now take a look around you again: are these people your equals or are you making judgments about your hierarchy? Paul invites us to be equals: the runaway slave who stole money is equal to the wealthy man. Because of what Jesus does, we are equal. This is turning the world upside down! The Roman world was all about hierarchy but this was all about partnership and equality.

### Spurring One Another

How do we manipulate each other? We talk about spurring one another on in Heb 10:24,25. Spur means taking something sharp to irritate a horse's thigh and make him run. We are supposed to spur one another on. Mr. Wonders did this for me: I didn't want to spend my Sunday afternoons going to a stinky place talking to old people. He spurred me on towards love and good deeds, even though I was reluctant and ended up finding the beautiful blessing God had for me. 60 years ago, I got to stand up in front of old people and read scripture out loud, saying what I thought about it. Mr. Wonders had his eye on me and cared about me, watching me and looking for my gifts. WE are to do this for each other.

We all have gifts and talents and insights in the physical and spiritual realm, to walk beside each other and spur one another on.