Philemon

Syllabus

1. The course requirements are as follows: the student will read the text of Philemon in Greek.

2. The student will read a commentary of his or her choosing on the book of Philemon.

3. The participant shall write a 4-5 page paper at the conclusion of the course describing their understanding of the text of the letter including all introductory matters.

4. The course grade will consist entirely of this written work.

5. The student is required to read the following commentary by the course instructor along with the commentary of their choosing (2 above).

Introductory Matters

Philemon is the shortest of all Paul’s letters. The subject of the letter, Onesimus, became Bishop of Ephesus according to an early tradition of the Church. The letter’s recipient was Philemon along with Archippus, Apphia, and the community which gathered in their house. Evidently they lived in Colossae. The letter was written because Onesimus, a slave, had run away. That was not uncommon in the Roman world. Paul did not write simply as a private individual to Philemon about this situation but as an apostle. Onesimus should be received as a Christian brother and not as a runaway slave subject to the death penalty. Evidence suggests that Paul wrote this letter while in prison in Rome sometime around 60-61 AD.

On the question of slavery in Christianity, we can make four observations. 1) Slaves are involved in serving Christ. 2) Owners have a master in heaven. 3) God deals impartially with master and slave. 4) Both are bond-servants of Christ. Though Paul nowhere calls for the abolition of slavery, FF Bruce wisely notes that “what this letter does is to bring us into an atmosphere in which the institution of slavery could only wilt and die”. Being Brothers in Christ abolishes such distinctions and the terms slave and master are transcended, even superseded.

Phile 1:1 Παύλος δέσμιος Χριστοῦ Ἰησοῦ καὶ Τιμόθεου ὁ ἀδελφὸς Φιλήμωνι τῷ ἀγαπητῷ καὶ συνεργῷ ἡμῶν

Philemon belongs to a community of mutual love and has demonstrated his love in the past. This note of mutual love echoes throughout the entire letter.
2 καὶ Ἀπφία τῇ ἁδελφῇ καὶ Ἀρχίππῳ τῷ συστρατιώτῃ ἡμῶν καὶ τῇ κατ᾿ οἴκον σου ἐκκλησίᾳ,

The folk named here are not recipients of the letter but merely greeted as a courtesy. Apphia was most likely Philemon’s wife, and Archippus their son- as this was the normal order of greeting when one addressed a person and his family. Archippus is noted as one who had labored with Paul in his missionary labors. The Church which meets in their house is also greeted, as a courtesy.

3 χάρις ὑμῖν καὶ εἰρήνη ἀπὸ θεοῦ πατρὸς ἡμῶν καὶ κυρίου Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ.

Paul’s greeting indicates a deep prayerful concern for Philemon, Apphia, Archippus and the church that meets in Philemon’s house, and that they might understand and appreciate more fully the grace of God in which they stand.

4 Εὐχαριστῶ τῷ θεῷ μου πάντοτε μνείαν σου ποιοῦμενος ἐπὶ τῶν προσευχῶν μου,

Once again Paul begins a letter by mentioning that he gives thanks to God for the recipient. See the companion letter, Colossians. Πάντοτε “Continually” means he did not forget Philemon in his regular prayers.

5 ἀκούων σου τὴν ἁγάπην καὶ τὴν πίστιν, ἣν ἔχεις πρὸς τὸν κύριον Ἰησοῦν καὶ εἰς πάντας τοὺς ἁγίους,

ἀκούων expresses continuity and duration; it suggests that Paul had received up to date information about him. Πίστιν means faithfulness towards Jesus and God’s people.

6 ὅπως ἡ κοινωνία τῆς πίστεως σου ἐνεργῆς γένηται ἐν ἐπιγνώσει παντὸς ἀγαθοῦ τοῦ ἐν ἡμῖν εἰς Χριστόν.

This is an intercession concerning Philemon’s generosity. Intercessory prayer springs out of the prayer of thanksgiving. Paul could not give thanks for the love and faith of his colleague without making intercession for him. ή κοινωνία τῆς πίστεως σου = your fellowship with other Christians created by faith. ἐνεργῆς means “effective” rather than “active”. This stresses the fact that we are being brought always into a closer relationship with Christ. In sum the verse says “I pray that your generosity, which arises from your faith, may lead you effectively into a deeper understanding and experience of every blessing which belongs to us as fellow-members in the body of Christ”.
7 ἐξον καὶ παράκλησιν ἐπὶ τῇ ἁγάπῃ σου, ὅτι τὰ σπλάγχνα τῶν ἁγίων ἀναπέπαυται διὰ σοῦ, ἀδελφέ.  

In this simple transition important ideas from both the thanksgiving and the body of the letter are mentioned or anticipated. He again mentions Philemon’s love. The second clause of the verse may indicate that Paul has learned of one particular deed by which Philemon has helped the congregation.

τὰ σπλάγχνα Designates pity or sympathy or tender mercy. Because Philemon had acted in this manner towards others, Paul expects he will act in the same way towards Onesimus.

ἀναπέπαυται means to cause to give rest, refresh, taking rest in a literal sense, or calming someone who is disturbed or upset.

8 Διὸ πολλὴν ἐν Χριστῷ παρρησίαν ἔχων ἐπιτάσσει σοι τὸ ἀνήκον

This section (vv8-20) is the heart of the letter, and it is an intercession for Onesimus. The introductory word Διὸ links it with everything said thus far. παρρησίαν describes someone who can speak out freely.

9 διὰ τὴν ἁγάπην μᾶλλον παρακαλῶ, τοιοῦτος ὁ Ὠς Παῦλος πρεσβύτης ὑνὶ δὲ καὶ δέσμιος Χριστοῦ Ἰησοῦ·

Paul does not intend to force compliance, instead he bases his appeal on the love of Christ. He wants Philemon to consent freely. Because he knows of Philemon’s kindness and generosity in the past that he is able to entreat rather than command, and he looks forward to Philemon’s love being shown once again.

τοιοῦτος ὁ = “since this is the sort of person I am”

πρεσβύτης can also denote an envoy and is not restricted to chronological age. Cf. Eph 6:20.

dέσμιος - prisoner, he shares in the suffering of Christ.

10 παρακαλῶ σε περὶ τοῦ ἐμοῦ τέκνου, δὲν ἐγέννησα ἐν τοῖς δεσμοῖς, Ὡνήσιμον,

“I encourage” is repeated yet again. He is reinforcing the theme of the letter- a request. This may have been the first word Philemon had heard of Onesimus since he ran away. Paul establishes the fact that he is a Christian, and this is very important for how Philemon can be expected to receive him. Onesimus means “helpful, profitable”.

τοῦ ἐμοῦ τέκνου, δὲν ἐγέννησα denotes the image of spiritual parenthood. There are numerous references to this in the New Testament- 1 Cor 4:15, 2 Tim 1:2, Titus 1:4. Likewise, in the Babylonian Talmud, “when a man teaches the son of another the Torah, the Scripture treats him as if he had fathered him”. It was also believed that the Jew who wins another to faith satisfies in an ideal manner the injunction to be fruitful and multiply. Since Onesimus is Paul’s son, he is therefore Philemon’s brother!
11 toν ποτέ σοι ἄχρηστον νυνὶ δὲ [καὶ] σοὶ καὶ ἐμοὶ ἐχρηστον,

ἄχρηστον / εὐχρηστον contrasts what Onesimus had once been and has since he met Christ now become. From useless to useful. This contrast between useful and useless occurs everywhere in Greek literature from Plato to the Shepherd of Hermas. Phrygian slaves were well known for being unreliable and unfaithful. Onesimus has become a different person. That is the mark of genuine conversion.

12 διὶ ἀνέπεμψά σοι, αὐτόν, τούτ’ ἔστιν τὰ ἐμὰ σπλάγχνα·

ἀνέπεμψά epistolary aorist. Such use of the aorist means the writer is placing himself in the situation of the readers- and should be translated as a present tense verb. Runaway slaves of the day were often taken to market and sold and the price obtained returned to the original owner. So far as Jewish law was concerned on the matter, see Dt 23:15-16. Paul thus expects Philemon to recognize that Paul is under no obligation to return Onesimus. But the rabbinic interpretation (BT Gittin 45a) is that it refers to a slave (including a gentile slave) who fled from outside the Land of Israel to the Land. The Medieval commentators noted that the reasoning is that if he fled from idol worship to Israel, than he should not be forced to return to idol worship. ἔστιν τὰ ἐμὰ σπλάγχνα = he is very dear to me. He doesn’t mean that Onesimus is literally his bowel!

13 Ὡν ἐγὼ ἐβουλόμην πρὸς ἐμαυτὸν κατέχειν, ᾧν ὑπὲρ σοῦ μοι διακονή ἐν τοῖς δεσμοῖς τοῦ εὐαγγελίου,

ἐβουλόμην = imperfect middle indicative, wish, will, would like. It would have been his preference. Imperfect verbs frequently indicate desire but not actuality. Aorist verbs are verbs of actual occurrence (see ἠθέλησα in the following verse). ὑπὲρ σου = as your representative.

14 χωρίς δὲ τῆς σῆς γνώμης οὐδὲν ἠθέλησα ποιῆσαι, ᾧν ἡ μὴ ὡς κατὰ ἀνάγκην τὸ ἀγαθὸν σου ἢ ἀλλὰ κατὰ ἐκούσιον.

γνώμησ Means “opinion” or “decision” and here has the connotation of “previous knowledge”. ᾧν ἡ μὴ ὡς κατὰ ἀνάγκην τὸ ἀγαθὸν σου ἢ ἀλλὰ κατὰ ἐκούσιον is Paul’s way of saying that Philemon’s action should be spontaneous and not forced.

15 Τάχα γὰρ διὰ τούτο ἐχωρίσθη πρὸς ὃραν, ᾧν αἰώνιον αὐτὸν ἀπέχησ,
Táxa implies possibility. πρὸς ᾠραν literally means “for an hour”. When something is but an hour it is quite insignificant when compared with its lasting consequences. Consequences are often far more important than actions.

16 οὐκέτι ὑς δοῦλον ἄλλη ὑπὲρ δοῦλον, ἀδελφὸν ἁγαπητὸν, μάλιστα ἐμοῖ, πόσῳ δὲ μᾶλλον σοί καὶ ἐν σαρκί καὶ ἐν κυρίῳ.

Onesimus will be far more than a slave to his master. Cf. I Cor 7:20-24. ὑπὲρ when used with the accusative means “beyond” or “more than”. There was no religious organization in the ancient near east or roman world which included a slave as a brother. Paul and the early church are unique in this. μάλιστα is a superlative form meaning especially. If Onesimus is a beloved brother for Paul than he is even more than that for Philemon.

17 εἰ σὺν με ἔχεις κοινωνόν, προσλάβοι αὐτὸν ὑς ἐμὲ.

Paul bases his appeal on the partnership he shares with Philemon. Paul doesn’t just intercede for Onesimus, he identifies with him.

18 εἰ δὲ τι ἡδίκησέν σε ἐν ὑφείλει, τοῦτο ἐμοὶ ἔλλογα.

There would have been serious financial consequences when a slave ran away. Loss of labor, loss of investment (the price of the slave), and cost of replacement. Further, to get all the way to Rome Onesimus most likely would have had to stolen funds. It was, after all, 900 or so miles away. ἔλλογα was a commercial term that meant “to charge to someone’s account.

19 ἐγὼ Παῦλος ἔγραψα τῇ ἐμῇ χειρί, ἐγὼ ἀποτίσω· ἵνα μὴ λέγω σοι ὅτι καὶ σεαυτόν μοι προσφείλεις.

ἐγὼ Παῦλος ἔγραψα τῇ ἐμῇ χειρί, ἐγὼ ἀποτίσω This parenthetical segment is Paul’s IOU. Note the emphatic ἐγὼ. The rest of the sentence harkens back to verse 18. Paul gently reminds Philemon that he owes Paul a lot more than Onesimus owes him!

20 ναὶ ἀδελφέ, ἐγὼ σου ὀναίμην ἐν κυρίῳ· ἀνάπαυσόν μου τὰ σπλάγχνα ἐν Χριστῷ.

ὁναίμην in the first person optative means “may I have benefit”.

21 Πεποιθώς τῇ ὑπακοῆ σου ἔγραψά σοι, εἰδὼς ὅτι καὶ ὑπὲρ ἡ λέγω ποιήσεις.

ὑπακοῆ means obedience rather than willingness. Obedience is the only proper response to the command of an Apostle.
22 ὧμα δὲ καὶ ἐτοίμαζέ μοι ἐξενίαν ἐλπίζω γὰρ ὅτι διὰ τῶν προσευχῶν ὑμῶν χαρισθῆσομαι ὑμῖν.

ἐξενίαν denotes hospitality and even entertainment; but it also even means “a guestroom”, which seems the sense used here. The outcome of Paul’s imprisonment is completely in the hands of God. Paul’s release would benefit them- and that is why he desires it.

23 Ἀσπάζεται σε Ὑπαφρᾶς ὁ συναίχμαλωτός μου ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ,

See Col 4:10-14.

24 Μάρκος, Ἀρίσταρχος, Δημᾶς, Λουκᾶς, οἱ συνεργοὶ μου.
25 Ἡ χάρις τοῦ κυρίου Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ μετὰ τοῦ πνεύματος ὑμῶν.

Appendix

Dä Briääf vom Pàulus an Filemoon- Zürichdeutsch

(15) Vilicht hät das grad müäsä sii, das är drum für ä Ziit lang vo Diir äwägg isch, damit än nachanä für immäär bi Där hàsch.
(16) Und zwaar nöd als Sklaav, sondärn mee als än Sklaav, nämlich als än Brüädär wo aagnoo isch, und das für miich, abär na fil mee für Diich, sowool im Flààisch als im Här.
(17) Wän Du mich für diin Gfäärtän aaluägsch, so nimm än uf wiä miich.
(18) Wänn är Diir abär äs Unrächt taa hät odär Diir öpis schuldig isch, so tuä das miir aaràchnä.
(20) Brüädär, ich wot froo sii übär Dich im Här, mach mär ä Fröid i Chrischtus.
(23) Än Gruäss vom Epafras, mim Mitgfangnä i Jesus Chrischtus,
(24) vom Markus, Arischtarchus, Demas und äm Lukas, minä Mitarbàitär.
(25) D'Gnaad fom Här Jesus Chrischtus wird mit Öiräm Gàischt sii.