



TABLE OF CONTENTS

New Testament.....2

Philemon 1:7-21..... 2

Paul’s Plea for Onesimus 2

Overview 2

Biblical Context.....3

Historical / Non-Biblical / Political Context 3

Historical Timeline / Biblical Timeframe.....4

Translation and Interpretation Notes.....4

What Does This Scripture Mean in Our World Today?.....5

Because of That, How Should We Be Living Our Lives? 6

Discussion Questions.....7

Gospel.....8

John 13:3-17 8

Overview 8

Biblical Context.....9

Historical / Non-Biblical / Political Context 9

Historical Timeline / Biblical Timeframe.....9

Translation and Interpretation Notes.....10

Does This Scripture Mean in Our World Today? 10

Because of That, How Should We Be Living Our Lives? 10

Discussion Questions.....11

Addendum 12

From Recognizing False Teaching to Examining Our Own Assumptions 12

A Connection Worth Exploring: Philemon and John..... 14



New Testament

Philemon 1:7-21

Context: Paul appeals to Philemon to receive Onesimus, an enslaved man, not merely as property or a servant, but as a beloved brother in Christ—challenging us to consider whether genuine Christian love can exist without changing how we treat one another.

PAUL'S PLEA FOR ONESIMUS

I have indeed received much joy and encouragement from your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you, my brother.

For this reason, though I am more than bold enough in Christ to command you to do the right thing, yet I would rather appeal to you on the basis of love—and I, Paul, do this as an old man and now also as a prisoner of Christ Jesus.

I am appealing to you for my child, Onesimus (oh-NEES-ih-mus), whose father I have become during my imprisonment. Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful to you and to me.

I am sending him, that is, my own heart, back to you. I wanted to keep him with me so that he might minister to me in your place during my imprisonment for the gospel, but I preferred to do nothing without your consent in order that your good deed might be voluntary and not something forced.

Perhaps this is the reason he was separated from you for a while, so that you might have him back for the long term, 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.

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

I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand: I will repay it. I say nothing about your owing me even your own self. Yes, brother, let me have this benefit from you in the Lord! Refresh my heart in Christ. Confident of your obedience, I am writing to you, knowing that you will do even more than I ask.

OVERVIEW

Paul's letter to Philemon is one of the shortest books in the New Testament, yet it raises one of Christianity's most challenging questions: ***What happens when the equality we proclaim in faith comes into conflict with the inequalities we accept in society?***

Paul writes to Philemon, a Christian who apparently owns an enslaved man named Onesimus. Onesimus has become closely associated with Paul during Paul's imprisonment and has become a Christian. Paul now sends Onesimus back to Philemon with an appeal that Philemon receive him differently—not simply as an enslaved person, but as a beloved brother. Rather than issuing a direct command, Paul appeals to Philemon's love and faith, asking him to act voluntarily.

The letter creates a striking tension. Paul does not explicitly condemn slavery or demand its abolition. Yet he asks Philemon to recognize a relationship that transcends the social hierarchy separating them. Paul even offers to repay anything Onesimus owes, placing himself between a person with power and someone vulnerable to that power.



The central theological question is whether Christian love merely changes our attitudes toward others or requires us to change the relationships, practices, and institutions that govern their lives. ***Can we genuinely call someone our brother or sister while continuing to treat that person as inferior?***

BIBLICAL CONTEXT

What comes immediately before (Philemon 1:1–6): Paul opens by addressing Philemon, Apphia, Archippus, and the church meeting in Philemon’s house. **He expresses gratitude for Philemon’s faith and love** and prays that their shared faith will become effective through a deeper recognition of what belongs to Christ.

What comes immediately after (Philemon 1:22–25): Paul expresses hope that he will be **released and visit Philemon**, asks that a guest room be prepared, and closes with greetings and a blessing. His anticipated visit adds a subtle dimension of accountability to his appeal.

Where the passage fits within the book: Philemon is a **personal letter**, not a systematic theological argument. Verses 7–21 contain its central appeal, moving from praise of Philemon’s love to a request that he demonstrate that love through his treatment of Onesimus.

The major theological movement: The letter moves from Christian identity to Christian responsibility—from professing love to practicing reconciliation, and from accepting established social relationships to reconsidering them in light of belonging to Christ.

A particularly important connection is Galatians 3:28, where Paul declares that in Christ there is neither slave nor free. Philemon presents a concrete situation in which that theological conviction must confront an existing social arrangement.

HISTORICAL / NON-BIBLICAL / POLITICAL CONTEXT

Slavery in the Roman Empire

Slavery was deeply embedded in the Roman economy and social order. Enslaved people worked in agriculture, households, businesses, mines, and administrative occupations. Some possessed considerable skills and responsibilities, but legally they remained under the authority of their enslavers.

Roman slavery was not identical to the race-based hereditary chattel slavery later practiced in the United States. People could become enslaved through warfare, birth, exposure, or other circumstances, and some could eventually gain freedom. Nevertheless, Roman slavery was a system of ownership, coercion, and profound inequality. Enslaved people were vulnerable to exploitation, punishment, and abuse.

That distinction matters because describing Roman slavery as different from American slavery must never become a way of portraying it as benign.

Onesimus and Philemon

Traditionally, Onesimus has been described as a runaway slave who may have stolen from Philemon. However, the letter does not explicitly establish either claim. Paul’s reference to a possible wrong or debt in verse 18 is conditional, and scholars debate why Onesimus was separated from Philemon and how he came to Paul.

What we can say with reasonable confidence is that Onesimus was enslaved, had developed a close relationship with Paul, and was being returned to a situation in which Philemon possessed considerable power over him.



The political significance of Paul's appeal

Paul's approach is both remarkable and limited.

It is remarkable because he asks a person with social authority to receive an enslaved person as a brother, effectively challenging the assumption that legal status determines human worth.

It is limited because Paul does not explicitly demand Onesimus's emancipation or condemn the institution of slavery.

That tension has shaped Christian interpretations for centuries. Some Christians used Philemon to defend the continuation of slavery, while abolitionists appealed to its recognition of shared humanity to argue that slavery contradicted Christian love.

The important historical question is not simply whether Paul was progressive by Roman standards. It is whether Christians today should stop at what Paul explicitly requested or follow the implications of the equality he proclaimed.

HISTORICAL TIMELINE / BIBLICAL TIMEFRAME

A brief timeline helps place this personal letter within the development of early Christianity.

APROX. TIME	HISTORICAL CONTEXT
AD 30s	The earliest Christian communities begin forming.
AD 40s–50s	Paul establishes and maintains relationships with Christian communities in the Roman Empire.
AD 50s–early 60s	Likely written during one of Paul's imprisonments; the precise location & date remain debated.
AD 1st century	Slavery remains an accepted legal and economic institution throughout the Roman Empire.
Later centuries	Christians interpret Philemon in conflicting ways, sometimes defending slavery and sometimes challenging it.

The important historical perspective is that Christianity began within an unequal social order, and its earliest writings contain both accommodations to that order and principles capable of challenging it.

TRANSLATION AND INTERPRETATION NOTES

“No longer as a slave ... but ... a beloved brother” (verse 16)

The Greek word *doulos* means “slave” or “enslaved person,” although some older English translations use “servant.” This distinction matters. “Servant” can suggest someone voluntarily employed, whereas “slave” accurately conveys the legal and social inequality underlying Paul's appeal.

“I appeal to you on the basis of love” (verse 9)

Paul contrasts his authority to command with his preference to appeal. This is not necessarily a completely pressure-free request. Paul invokes his age, imprisonment, spiritual relationship with Philemon, and confidence that Philemon will do even more than requested.

“I know that you will do even more than I say” (verse 21)

Paul leaves his ultimate expectation unstated. Some interpreters believe he is indirectly asking Philemon to free Onesimus. Others caution that the text does not explicitly say this. The ambiguity is important. Paul's appeal opens the possibility of a more radical response without specifying exactly what that response must be.



WHAT DOES THIS SCRIPTURE MEAN IN OUR WORLD TODAY?

Recognizing someone's humanity is not necessarily the same as treating that person equally.

Philemon challenges the difference between what we believe about people and how we actually treat them. Christians regularly proclaim that everyone is created in God's image. Yet our communities still contain distinctions based on wealth, employment, race, education, political affiliation, social standing, and perceived moral worth.

The question is whether these distinctions influence whose opinions we respect, whose struggles we recognize, and whose dignity we defend.

In a community such as Grant County, where economic circumstances and social relationships can vary considerably, the letter invites us to examine how easily people become identified by their position rather than their humanity.

A person may be described as a business owner, factory worker, immigrant, welfare recipient, formerly incarcerated individual, or unemployed neighbor. But those descriptions do not tell us the value of the person.

The modern metaphor: We may not legally own another person, but we can still imprison people within the categories we assign them.

Love can require surrendering an advantage.

Philemon possesses the legal and social advantage in his relationship with Onesimus.

Paul's appeal asks him to reconsider how he exercises that power. This is relevant whenever one person has greater authority, influence, security, or resources than another.

A business owner may have power over employees. A landlord may have power over tenants. A church leader may have power over members. A community majority may have power over a minority.

The Christian question is not merely whether that power is legal. It is whether it is being exercised with justice, humility, and compassion.

There is a meaningful difference between asking, "What am I entitled to do?" and asking, "What does love require me to do?"

Reconciliation is more than returning to the way things were.

It would be easy to describe Philemon as a story about forgiveness and reconciliation. But reconciliation becomes problematic when it simply restores an unequal relationship without addressing the inequality.

If Onesimus returns and Philemon forgives him but continues treating him merely as property, has the relationship truly been transformed?

This question reaches beyond slavery. Families sometimes reconcile without addressing harmful behavior. Churches sometimes seek unity without confronting injustice. Communities sometimes call for peace while leaving the causes of division untouched.

Reconciliation that preserves injustice may produce quiet, but quiet is not necessarily peace.



Christian faith should influence how we respond to social systems.

Paul does not write a political manifesto against Roman slavery. He addresses a particular relationship within a larger system. That creates an important question for Christians today: Is it enough to treat individuals kindly while accepting systems that place others at a disadvantage?

The letter does not provide a complete answer. But it encourages us to recognize that personal faith and social responsibility cannot always be separated. This is especially relevant when discussing poverty, employment practices, immigration, criminal justice, racial inequality, and access to opportunity.

The challenge is to examine those issues through the lens of human dignity rather than immediately retreating into political positions.

The people we regard as outsiders may reveal the limits of our faith.

Onesimus occupies the vulnerable position in this story. Yet Paul describes him as useful, beloved, and spiritually significant. The person Philemon might once have understood primarily through a legal relationship must now be recognized through a spiritual relationship.

This invites a difficult modern question: *Who are the people we are willing to love in principle but reluctant to accept as equals in practice?*

That question may apply to people of different religions, political beliefs, sexual orientations, economic circumstances, or personal histories.

Philemon asks whether the love we profess extends to people whose full inclusion might require something of us.

BECAUSE OF THAT, HOW SHOULD WE BE LIVING OUR LIVES?

Treat people as human beings before assigning them labels.

Our first responsibility is to recognize the dignity of others, especially when social, economic, religious, or political categories make it easy to dismiss them. This does not require agreement with every belief or behavior. It requires refusing to make disagreement a justification for denying someone's humanity.

Examine how we use whatever power we possess.

Few of us think of ourselves as powerful, but nearly everyone exercises influence somewhere. We have influence within families, workplaces, churches, neighborhoods, and communities. Philemon invites us to ask whether we use that influence primarily to protect our position or to improve the lives of others.

Practice reconciliation that addresses the underlying problem.

Forgiveness is important, but it should not become an excuse for ignoring harm or preserving injustice.

When relationships are damaged, we should seek not merely the absence of conflict but the restoration of dignity, fairness, and mutual respect.

Allow love to challenge our traditions and assumptions.

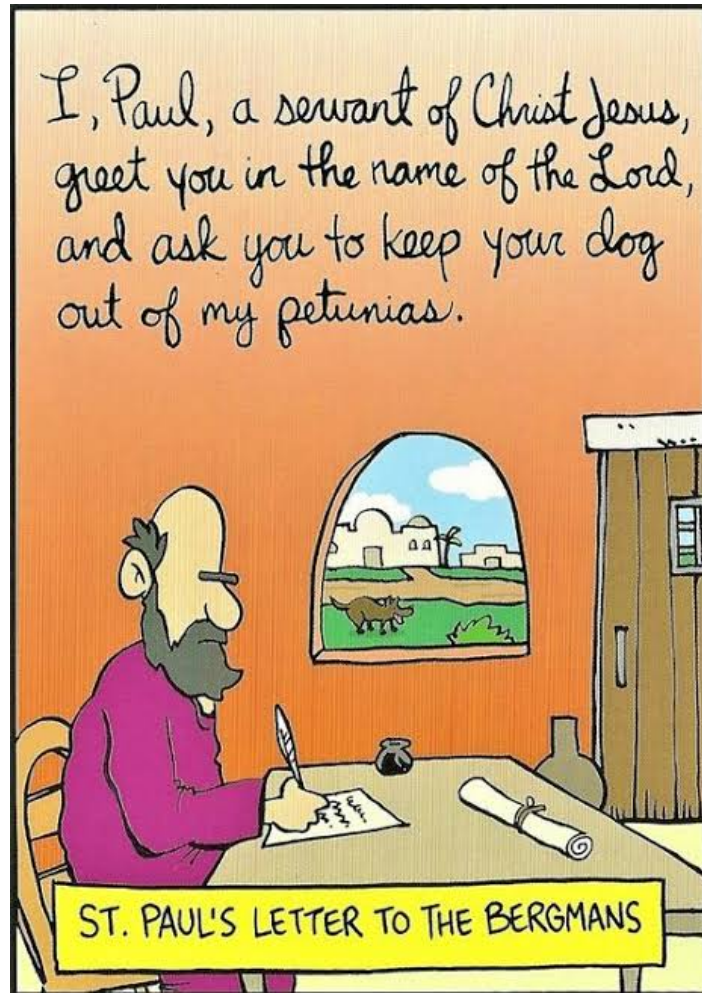
Philemon lived within a society that considered slavery normal. We also live within social arrangements that future generations may question. Christian discipleship requires the humility to ask whether practices we accept without much thought are consistent with the love we claim to follow.

A useful personal question: *What do I accept as normal simply because it has always been that way?*



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. *What is the difference between saying that everyone is equal in God's eyes and actually treating everyone as equal?*
2. *Who are the people in our communities whom we find easiest to love from a distance but hardest to accept as equals?*
3. *Paul never explicitly tells Philemon to free Onesimus. Should Christians limit their moral responsibilities to what Scripture explicitly commands, or should we sometimes follow the implications of its teachings?*





Gospel

John 13:3-17

Context: During his final meal with his disciples, Jesus sets aside his position of authority to perform the work of a servant, demonstrating that true spiritual leadership is expressed through humility, love, and service rather than status or power.

Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands and that he had come from God and was going to God, got up from supper, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself.

Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him.

He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?"

Jesus answered, "You do not know now what I am doing, but later you will understand."

Peter said to him, "You will never wash my feet."

Jesus answered, "Unless I wash you, you have no share with me."

Simon Peter said to him, "Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!"

Jesus said to him, "One who has bathed does not need to wash, except for the feet, but is entirely clean. And you are clean, though not all of you."

For he knew who was to betray him; for this reason, he said, "Not all of you are clean."

After he had washed their feet, had put on his robe, and had reclined again, he said to them, "Do you know what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord, and you are right, for that is what I am. So, if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. Very truly, I tell you, slaves are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them. If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them."

OVERVIEW

Jesus is sharing a meal with his disciples shortly before his arrest and crucifixion. Knowing that his death is approaching, and fully aware of his relationship with God, Jesus gets up from the table, removes his outer robe, ties a towel around himself, and begins washing his disciples' feet. This was a task associated with servants and hospitality, not the expected behavior of a respected teacher and leader.

Peter objects, apparently unable to reconcile his understanding of Jesus' authority with such a humble act. Jesus explains that Peter does not yet understand what is happening but will understand later. When Peter finally agrees, he goes to the opposite extreme, asking Jesus to wash not only his feet but also his hands and head.

After completing the washing, Jesus returns to the table and explains his actions. If he, their teacher and Lord, has washed their feet, they should be willing to serve one another in the same spirit. His example challenges conventional assumptions about authority, dignity, and social position.



The central theological question is whether we can genuinely follow Jesus while refusing to practice the humility and service he demonstrated. Jesus does not simply instruct his followers to love one another. He physically demonstrates what that love requires.

BIBLICAL CONTEXT

What comes immediately before:

John 13:1–2 introduces the meal and establishes the setting. Jesus knows that his departure is approaching, and the narrator emphasizes that he loves his followers “to the end.” The passage also introduces Judas’ impending betrayal.

What comes immediately after:

In John 13:18–30, Jesus identifies the presence of betrayal among his disciples, and Judas leaves the gathering. In verses 31–35, Jesus gives his disciples the new commandment to love one another as he has loved them.

Where the passage fits within John:

Chapter 13 begins the extended farewell section of John’s Gospel, encompassing chapters 13–17. Jesus prepares his disciples for his departure by teaching them about love, service, the Holy Spirit, their relationship with God, and their responsibilities to one another. Unlike Matthew, Mark, and Luke, John does not narrate the institution of the Lord’s Supper at this meal. Instead, John places the washing of feet at the center of Jesus’ actions.

HISTORICAL / NON-BIBLICAL / POLITICAL CONTEXT

In first-century Judea, washing feet was a practical necessity. People commonly wore sandals and traveled along dusty roads. Providing water for guests to wash their feet was an expected expression of hospitality.

However, there was an important social distinction between providing water and personally washing another person’s feet. Foot washing could be performed by servants or enslaved people and was considered low-status work. A host might offer water without personally performing the washing. For a respected teacher to kneel and wash the feet of his students was an extraordinary reversal of expected social roles.

Roman society was highly hierarchical. Status, wealth, citizenship, gender, and freedom determined much about a person’s position. Slavery was deeply embedded in the economic and social structure of the Roman Empire. Against that background, Jesus’ behavior challenges the assumption that greater authority entitles someone to greater privilege.

An important distinction: Jesus is not merely telling powerful people to be nicer to those beneath them. He is demonstrating that the very meaning of authority must change when love and service become its foundation. **This would have been socially unsettling in Jesus’ world—and it remains challenging wherever religious, political, or economic authority is associated with entitlement rather than responsibility.**

HISTORICAL TIMELINE / BIBLICAL TIMEFRAME

A detailed timeline is unnecessary for understanding this passage, but its placement is important.

- Approx. 30 CE: The final meal in Jerusalem, shortly before Jesus’ arrest and crucifixion.
- Approx. 90–100 CE: A commonly proposed period for the composition of John’s Gospel, although scholars debate the precise dating.



TRANSLATION AND INTERPRETATION NOTES

“Unless I wash you, you have no share with me” (John 13:8).

The word translated as “share” refers to having a part or participation in something. Jesus’ statement suggests that Peter must be willing to receive what Jesus offers before he can fully participate in the life Jesus represents. This introduces an important dimension often overlooked: Christian humility involves not only serving others but also being willing to receive service.

Peter’s resistance may arise from respect, but it also reveals his difficulty accepting a relationship that reverses his expectations.

DOES THIS SCRIPTURE MEAN IN OUR WORLD TODAY?

Jesus’ actions challenge an assumption that continues to shape modern society: that authority is demonstrated through power, privilege, recognition, or the ability to direct others. In this passage, Jesus possesses authority but chooses to express it through service.

That distinction is particularly important in religious communities. Churches can become preoccupied with positions, titles, doctrinal correctness, influence, and the preservation of traditions. Yet Jesus places a towel in the hands of those who would follow him. His example raises a difficult question: *Are we more concerned with defending our understanding of Christianity or demonstrating the character of Christ?*

The passage also challenges the distinction between people considered deserving and undeserving of compassion. Jesus washes the feet of a group that includes people who will misunderstand, deny, abandon, and betray him. The narrative strongly suggests that Judas is present, although John does not individually describe whose feet Jesus washes. Jesus’ service is therefore not simply a reward for good behavior.

In contemporary life, this applies to the way we treat political opponents, people of different religions, individuals with different interpretations of Scripture, immigrants, people experiencing poverty, and those whose lives do not conform to our expectations.

In Grant County, Indiana, the metaphor is particularly accessible. Rural communities understand the importance of neighbors helping neighbors, whether during planting and harvest, illness, financial hardship, or family emergencies.

But Jesus’ example asks us to move beyond helping people we already know, like, or agree with. It asks whether we can serve people without first requiring them to satisfy our expectations. *The towel becomes a metaphor for the willingness to set aside status, certainty, and personal advantage in order to meet another person’s needs.*

It is also worth remembering that humility does not mean permitting abuse or surrendering moral judgment. Jesus’ example challenges the misuse of power; it does not require vulnerable people to remain subject to exploitation.

BECAUSE OF THAT, HOW SHOULD WE BE LIVING OUR LIVES?

Practice service without expecting recognition.

Jesus does not wash his disciples’ feet to enhance his reputation. His example encourages acts of kindness motivated by genuine concern rather than public acknowledgment, personal advantage, or the expectation of gratitude.



Measure leadership by responsibility rather than privilege.

Whether in churches, government, businesses, or families, leadership should be evaluated by how authority is used to benefit others—particularly those with less influence or power.

Extend compassion beyond those who agree with us.

Serving people we admire is relatively easy. Jesus' example becomes more challenging when we encounter people whose beliefs, behavior, or circumstances make us uncomfortable. Disagreement does not eliminate our responsibility to treat others with dignity.

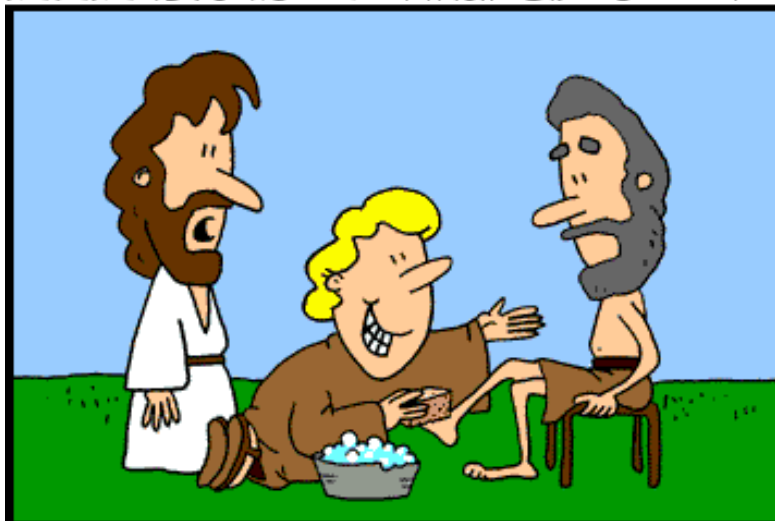
Learn to receive help as well as offer it.

Peter's resistance reminds us that pride can appear in unexpected forms. Sometimes we insist on independence because accepting help makes us feel vulnerable. Genuine community requires both the humility to serve and the humility to be served.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. *What is the difference between serving someone out of genuine love and serving someone because we expect something in return?*
2. *Jesus apparently washed the feet of disciples who would later abandon or betray him. What does that suggest about how we should treat people who disappoint us or disagree with us?*
3. *Can Christians become so focused on defending their religious beliefs that they overlook the example Jesus gives in this passage?*
4. *If Jesus were to walk into our church today, what might he identify as our modern equivalent of washing one another's feet?*

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(See John 13:1-11)

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YOU'VE BEEN DOING A GREAT JOB SERVING OTHERS, BUT YOU GOTTA STOP ASKING FOR TIPS



Addendum

From Recognizing False Teaching to Examining Our Own Assumptions

Connecting Last Week's Scripture to Philemon

Last week, in 1 Timothy 1:3–8 and Mark 7:1–2, 5–9, we considered the dangers of false teaching, misplaced religious authority, and allowing human traditions to become more important than the principles those traditions are supposed to serve.

In 1 Timothy, the concern is teaching that produces speculation and controversy rather than love arising from a pure heart, a good conscience, and sincere faith. In Mark, Jesus challenges religious leaders who have elevated human traditions while neglecting God's commandments.

Both passages invite us to examine not simply whether religious teaching sounds authoritative, but whether it reflects the deeper purposes of faith.

This week, Philemon takes that examination one step further.

Paul writes to a Christian who lives within a society where slavery is legal, customary, and widely accepted. Philemon likely has little reason, according to the standards of his culture, to question his authority over Onesimus.

Yet Paul asks him to reconsider that relationship through the lens of Christian love.

Paul does not explicitly condemn slavery or command Philemon to free Onesimus. Instead, he asks Philemon to receive him as a beloved brother.

This creates an important connection between the two lessons: **Last week asked whether our religious traditions and teachings truly reflect God's love. This week asks whether our accepted social practices and personal relationships reflect that same love.**

When Tradition and Love Come Into Conflict

The connection becomes especially meaningful when we recognize that something can be legal, traditional, culturally accepted, and even defended through religious interpretation without necessarily being consistent with the broader moral principles of Christianity.

Slavery provides a powerful historical example. For generations, Christians debated slavery using Scripture. Some defended the institution by pointing to biblical passages that acknowledged or regulated it. Others argued that the biblical principles of human dignity, love of neighbor, and equality before God ultimately made slavery morally indefensible.

The disagreement was not simply over whether Scripture mattered. It concerned how Scripture should be interpreted and applied.

That brings us back to Jesus' criticism in Mark 7.

How do we distinguish between faithfully preserving a religious tradition and allowing that tradition to prevent us from recognizing a deeper moral responsibility?

This question is not limited to ancient slavery. It invites us to examine our own assumptions, including those we may have inherited from our families, communities, churches, and culture.



Discernment Requires More Than Identifying Someone Else's Errors

There is another important connection. When we discuss false teaching, it can be tempting to think primarily about other people—the religious leaders, public figures, or individuals whose interpretations we believe are mistaken. But genuine spiritual discernment must also include ourselves.

We might ask:

- Am I evaluating this teaching because it reflects the love and character of Christ, or because it confirms what I already believe?
- Am I applying the same standards of biblical interpretation to teachings I agree with and those I disagree with?
- Am I willing to reconsider a long-held belief if a deeper understanding of Scripture challenges it?
- When I disagree with someone, am I trying to understand that person or simply prove that I am right?

These questions do not require abandoning our convictions. They require approaching those convictions with humility.

A Common Thread: Love as the Purpose of Faith

Perhaps the strongest connection between these passages is the place of love.

In 1 Timothy 1:5, Paul writes that the aim of instruction is love arising from a pure heart, a good conscience, and sincere faith.

In Philemon, Paul appeals to love as the reason Philemon should reconsider his relationship with Onesimus.

And in Mark 7, Jesus challenges religious practices that have become disconnected from the deeper obligations of faith.

Although the circumstances differ, all three passages invite us to examine the relationship between religious belief and moral behavior.

The purpose of faith is not simply to defend what we have always believed. It is to help us become the people God calls us to be.

A Question to Carry From One Sunday to the Next

Last week, we asked how to recognize teaching that may lead people away from the purposes of faith.

This week, perhaps we should ask an even more personal question: **What happens when the teaching we most need to question is something we have believed ourselves?**

Philemon offers no recorded answer to Paul's appeal. We do not know whether he freed Onesimus or how their relationship ultimately changed. But Paul leaves him—and perhaps us—with a difficult challenge:

If our faith changes how we see another human being, shouldn't it also change how we treat that person?

That may be one of the most important ways to recognize whether our understanding of Christianity is producing the love it is intended to inspire.



A Connection Worth Exploring: Philemon and John

In Philemon, Paul asks a man with social and legal power over Onesimus to reconsider that relationship in light of Christian brotherhood.

In John, Jesus demonstrates what happens when a person with authority voluntarily places himself in the position of a servant.

Philemon asks what Christian love requires of a person who holds power. John shows us how Jesus uses his power.

Jesus knew who would betray him, yet he still picked up the towel.