

An appeal to the heart - a Bible Study on Paul's letter to Philemon

Opening: Leader opens in prayer.

1. Gathering (each member of the group can choose one of the following):

- Tell about a reunion with a friend that you hadn't seen for a long time.
- OR: Name a friend with whom you can always pick up the friendship, right where you left off, no matter how long it's been since you last saw them. What properties about that friend do you most appreciate?
- OR: What's an issue of justice that really concerns you? How do you attempt to engage with that issue?

2. Wrestling with God's Word

As a large group, read aloud through **Paul's letter to Philemon.**

Now break up into smaller groups of three or four (no more than four!). In your smaller group, use the 'question mark, lightbulb, arrow' method (described below) to unpack one of the passage selections below.

- Each smaller group should choose a different passage (or passages – try to get the groups to cover all the passages between them).
- After about 10-15 minutes, gather together in the large group again and share what you have discovered about your passage.
- Have each smaller group appoint a 'scribe' who will record the group's thoughts, questions, ideas, etc and help the group report back to the large group. If others want to write dot points, feel free!

The question mark, light bulb, arrow method of Bible study:

Choose a short passage. (It's possible and fruitful to go verse by verse, but you can also work through the passage in short paragraphs).

Read the passage (or verse) aloud.

Then use the three symbols below to let the Holy Spirit unpack the passage for you. Write the group's thoughts and ideas beside each symbol.



Question mark. What *questions* arise from the passage? What is unexpected, what do you find difficulty understanding, or what needs more explanation? *Important: at this stage, do NOT try to answer the questions. Do NOT allow someone from the group to try to answer other people's questions. Just let the questions be questions for now.*



Light bulb. What *new connections* have you made? What *ideas* are arising from the passage? How have the 'lights gone on' in your understanding through this passage?



Arrow. What is hitting your *heart*? What is God saying directly to you? **What is the application** of this verse or passage in your life?

Passages for small groups:

1. Paul's greeting: Philemon 1-3

? Question marks.

*** Light bulbs.**

→ Arrows.

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2. Paul's prayer: Philemon 4-7

? Question marks.

*** Light bulbs.**

→ Arrows.

3. The foundation for Paul's appeal: Philemon 8-12

? Question marks.

*** Light bulbs.**

→ Arrows.

4. Paul's appeal: Philemon 13-16

? Question marks.

*** Light bulbs.**

→ Arrows.

5. Paul's appeal: Philemon 17-22

? Question marks.

✳️Light bulbs.

➡️Arrows.

6. Conclusion: Philemon 23-25

? Question marks.

✳️Light bulbs.

➡️Arrows.

Gather as a large group again and share what you have discovered.

Wrestling with the World

In the Roman world of Paul's time, the institution of slavery was simply presumed to be 'the way things are.' Slavery was foundational to the way that society operated. The idea that certain people were inherently more worthwhile (masters) and other people were able to be regarded as 'possessions' (slaves) was at the basis of the class distinctions in society. It is not that all masters were bad or tyrannical to their slaves; some masters loved their slaves and treated them carefully – but still as 'treasured possessions.' Others, of course, did lord it over their slaves and treated them terribly (for more information, read the paragraphs in Appendix below).

Read the following passages.

Matthew 20:24-28

Ephesians 6:5-9

1 Cor 7:22

1 Timothy 6:1-2

Philemon 16

How do these passage challenge 'The way things are' in terms of slavery?

How does the whole tone of Paul's letter to Philemon challenge the idea that people can be possessions?

In what way is this letter 'gospel' – good news – for Onesimus?

In what way is this letter 'gospel' – good news – for Philemon?

How does the good news of Jesus transform human relationships?

As a group, list some ways people are treated as 'possessions' or otherwise degraded or dehumanised in our modern world.

In what ways does the good news of Jesus Christ challenge and transform 'the way things are' in terms of these dehumanising institutions? How do you think Jesus wants to use *you* in changing and challenging these institutions of injustice?

(See appendix below to find out more about modern day slavery and other injustices)

LSF – LOVE one another, SERVE the world, FOLLOW Jesus

How does Paul's letter to Philemon invite you into the life of

- Loving One Another?
- Serving the World?
- Following Jesus?

What could your group do together (that you couldn't do alone) to practice these aspects of life in the time before you meet again?

What will you do? Plan it now.

CLOSING: end with prayer for one another and the group. You might do this in groups of two or three, or as a whole group. Ask Jesus to fill you with his Holy Spirit so you have the courage and ability to challenge 'the way things are' in unjust situations. Pray for people who are dehumanised by others in any way.

6. Appendix:

For Further reading:

'Onesimus, a slave in the Roman social system and subject to its laws, which might justly be invoked, has a transformed status in the household of Christ. He is to be received by Philemon as "no longer a slave but more than a slave, a beloved brother ... both in the flesh and in the Lord".

Onesimus, whose name means "useful," was formerly "useless" to Philemon, "but now he is indeed useful" both to Philemon and to Paul..

Philemon, the master of a sizable household in Colossae (Col 4:9) and ostensibly the patron of the church that meets in his house, bears a quite different role in the household of Christ. He is a dear friend, a coworker and a brother of Paul and of Onesimus, who is no longer his slave. Philemon has his duties and obligations within this household. Paul is confident that Philemon will act voluntarily in love, without coercion, because of his allegiance to the Master of the house and his proven character.

In the eyes of the Roman world, Onesimus is the debtor and Philemon is due his recompense. Thus on Onesimus's behalf Paul writes an imaginary blank voucher, payable in the currency of Rome: "If he has wronged you in any way, or owes you anything, charge that to my account. I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand: I will repay it". But then Paul deftly recalls the ledger of accounts kept in the household of Christ. Philemon owes Paul his "own self", his entrance into the household of Christ. Philemon surely can be counted on to do the right thing in repaying his indebtedness to Paul. Or, more important, "refresh my heart in Christ". Hopeful of reconciliation, Paul banks on Philemon's indebtedness and hospitality: "welcome him as you would welcome me ... prepare a guest room for me." Commentary taken from Word Biblical Commentary volume 44: Colossians, Philemon by Peter T O'Brien, digital edition, © 1982 by Word, Incorporated.

Social Justice Challenge:

To find out more about modern day slavery and other injustices and what you might be able to do to challenge these, check out <http://www.antislavery.org/english/> or www.micahchallenge.org