



# A New Identity

September 5, 2010

## Focus Scripture Philemon 1-21

Additional Scriptures  
Jeremiah 18:1-11  
Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18  
Luke 14:25-33

God, you have known and loved us; you have made us wonderfully and fearfully. May this growing knowledge form a new sense of who we are in you. Guide us to embrace a new vision of our identity that is grounded in justice and compassion for all. Amen.

Check out Spirit Sightings for connections between current events and the focus passage. Spirit Sighting are posted weekly prior to the date of use.

Being in a relationship with Christ is life-changing. It shapes who we are, changes our outlook, and inspires us to live in God's ways. From the heart of love, justice flows out into all our relationships, even when doing so is difficult or comes at a cost. We wrestle with the implications of our new identity as individuals and as the church, discerning with one another how to live into God's grace and peace.

## Focus Scripture: Philemon 1-21

The letter to Philemon is a request to a Christian who hosts a church in his home. Philemon was an influential leader in the community and, as was common at that time, a slave owner. He is described as a dedicated and highly respected "dear friend and co-worker" (v. 1). The issue at hand is that Philemon's runaway slave Onesimus has become a Christian, and Paul has become his spiritual parent. This "private" letter was delivered to Philemon by Onesimus, but addressed to the whole church. This lifts up the situation of Christian slaves as a public and theological issue. Paul moves the treatment of Onesimus from the private realm to the public life of the Christian realm, highlighting the importance of justice in relationships within the Body of Christ.

This letter follows the basic structure of other Pauline letters: greetings (verses 1-3), a prayer of thanksgiving (verses 4-7), the appeal (verses 8-22), closing greetings (verses 23-24), and benediction (verse 25). In this letter, Paul urges Philemon to welcome Onesimus into the household and the church not as a slave, but as a Christian brother.

Paul, who refers to himself as a "prisoner of Christ," writes this letter while imprisoned (v. 9), perhaps in Ephesus. Here Paul encounters Onesimus, who had fled Philemon's household, perhaps due to a problem with Philemon, other slaves, working conditions, or some other grievance. In that circumstance, a slave normally would go to a trusted third party to ask for intervention. Such a slave was not legally regarded as a runaway.

When referring to Onesimus, the words *useful* and *useless* come into play. The Greek name Onesimus was common for slaves. It means "useful" or "profitable," perhaps as a tribute or as an incentive

to slaves to live up to the name. Onesimus may have been "useless" (v. 11) to Philemon not because he was lazy, but because he was absent.

Because Onesimus is now a Christian, the relationship between Onesimus and Philemon is no longer slave and master, but brothers in Christ. Paul does not "pull rank" on Philemon to compel him to accept this new relationship, but appeals to Philemon's understanding of faith. Paul also pledges to pay any debt Onesimus may owe. Making these appeals, Paul urges Philemon to follow the law of Christ's love and justice rather than the regulations of Roman slave law.

Ultimately, God desires all people to amend their ways and embody justice. **Jeremiah 18:1-11** presents God as a potter who has the power to mould destiny in order to urge people to live according to God's justice. Known and loved, wonderfully and fearfully made, the psalmist in **Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18** rejoices in being a part of God's creation. Being in an intimate relationship with God defines one's identity and shapes a meaningful life. In **Luke 14:25-33**, Jesus teaches about the costliness of discipleship and how the summons to follow calls for personal sacrifice and reshaped priorities.



Behind the identity given to us by society lies our true identity in relationship with God and Christ. Living as Christ's own enables us to forge relationships of love and respect with one another. How do you perceive your relationship with God? What is God longing for you to do as you celebrate God's presence in your relationships? In what ways can church members honour and support one another in this sacred call?

