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Philemon

Bridging Barriers to Brotherhood

Philemon

Sometimes I almost laugh at myself (and at God's methods) as I watch him deal with my prejudices against people: too rich, too stupid, too unstable, wrong theology, wrong body build, wrong leadership style. It is as if the minute I settle into one of them, God puts his hand into his bag of many-faceted believers, and pulls out one who illustrates exactly my current prejudice. Then God lays his hand on that person's shoulder and says to me, "This is my child. I love this person. Notice all of his or her wonderful qualities? See, I am showing them to you. You can love this person too." And the barriers begin to fall.

GROUP DISCUSSION. God brings all sorts of people into the Christian faith. What kinds of barriers keep them from feeling like brothers and sisters to each other?

PERSONAL REFLECTION. What are some barriers that block your own links with other believers? Who are some of the people behind those barriers? Who has bridged those barriers—and how? As you have

linked with another Christian in spite of the barriers, what have you learned about that person? about yourself? about God?

In a society where slavery was an established institution that Christians had no authority to change, Paul wrote of how to behave within that framework. *Read the book of Philemon.*

1. If you were Philemon, would you want to receive this letter from Paul? Explain.

2. Study the greeting of Paul's letter in verses 1-3. What can you know about the writer, the receivers and the relationship between them?

3. How do Philemon's faith and love form a basis for what Paul is about to ask him to do (vv. 4-7)?

4. What all can you know about Onesimus from verses 8-21?

5. In what different ways does Paul express his love for Onesimus throughout the letter?

How does he express his love for Philemon?

6. When have you particularly enjoyed the love and acceptance of God's people?

7. The name Onesimus means "useful." Yet Paul admits in verse 11 that Onesimus had been useless to Philemon in the past. What steps does Paul take to convince Philemon that Onesimus will now live up to his name (vv. 11-15)?

8. What gentle pressure does Paul exert to ensure that Philemon treats Onesimus as he has requested?

9. If you had been Onesimus, how would you feel returning nearly one thousand miles to Philemon—with this letter and under these

circumstances? (What would you fear? What would you hope for? What temptations would you face?)

10. The Christians mentioned in this letter had to cross many social, economic and geographic barriers in order to relate to each other. When have you benefited from a relationship with a Christian who is vastly different from yourself?

11. How could Paul's instructions help you rethink your relationship with Christians who don't fit easily into your natural circle of friends?

Reread verses 4-7 of Paul's letter to Philemon. Who might Paul be describing among your own circle of acquaintances? Pray Paul's prayer of verse 6 for that person.

Now or Later

Think of a Christian you know who is on the other side of some potential barrier to your accepting each other as "a dear brother or sister." What can you do to begin to bridge that barrier? In the near future, look for an opportunity to take those steps.