

# PHILEMON

## Culturing Pearls

### Introduction

Christian leaders often attempt to remove irritants for convenience. However, if they viewed the individuals God sends their way as potential gems rather than risks, God could create remarkable gems in chaplaincy. The Book of Philemon illustrates this process when dealing with offenders within God's sovereign plans. What initially seems like a nuisance or persistent aggravation can transform us and them into pearls for the Lord.

The following is a very brief summary of the concepts for chaplaincy that I found in the Epistle of Philemon. It is certainly not an extensive or in-depth essay for the reader. However, completing the work provided to you at the end of this essay will help you to understand 'what a chaplain really encounters when ministering in the prison ministry.' I would challenge you to build your own praxis based on Philemon. Even better, provide me with concepts I may have missed or need improvement.

### Purpose and Power of Prison Chaplaincy

The Epistle of Philemon reveals the true **purpose and power** of prison chaplaincy. This text provides chaplains with the praxis, motive, and providential understanding necessary for ministering to inmates.<sup>1</sup> Understanding the truths in this portion of God's Word offers a clear and firm foundation for the chaplain's ministry. Without this anchoring effect, chaplains may find themselves adrift in a sea of inmate manipulation and self-defeat. Developing a theology of prison ministry from Philemon provides the focus and support needed.

### Chaplaincy is Built on Relationships

Paul uses several terms to describe the relationships within the ministry in his letter to Philemon. Notably, he refers to himself as a "prisoner of Christ," a foundational characteristic for chaplains and their relationship with Jesus Christ. Declaring oneself a prisoner for Jesus Christ signifies to inmates and the world a commitment to God's will.

Paul was not only spiritually bound but also physically imprisoned with Onesimus. Understanding inmates is best achieved through shared experiences, though the correctional industry often does not hire ex-offenders. Therefore, chaplains must empathize with inmates to enhance their ministry's clarity and value.

Paul's Epistles describe other ministers as "our brother, dearly beloved, fellow laborer, fellow soldier, fellow prisoner, and fellow worker." Analyzing these terms reveals a pattern of ministerial ties rather than social contacts. The term "fellow soldier" highlights the battle inherent in prison ministry, placing chaplains in the battlefield of sin and redemption.

Chaplaincy relies on relationships with warriors and esteemed co-laborers of the church. Without the support of laypeople and church leaders, chaplaincy would be ineffective. A significant portion of daily prison ministry is performed by correctional volunteers. There is nothing more valuable to a chaplain than fellow laborers in the war behind the walls.

Chaplains must dedicate significant time to developing relationships to be effective. Those with a "lone ranger" mentality risk burnout from attempting to manage the entire ministry alone or facing criticism from administration for their lack of collaboration. Paul recognized that ministry heavily relies on nurtured relationships with co-laborers in Christ.

For Paul, the common bond in ministerial relationships was the grace and peace of God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. He viewed the community through a uniquely spiritual lens, never seeking to manipulate, deceive, or coerce service. His focus was on prayer, faith in Christ, and nurturing others to share the same commitment. By maintaining this focus, chaplains can find tremendous support for their ministry and experience the peace and grace that comes with shared faith.

### **Chaplaincy Depends on the Community of Faith**

Just as important as the relationships developed by the chaplain are the resources he develops in the community. Paul provides a significant insight into community support when he writes in Philemon,

I always thank my God as I remember you in my prayers, because I hear about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints. I pray that you may be active in sharing your faith, so that you will have a full understanding of every good thing we have in Christ. Your love has given me great joy and encouragement, because you, brother, have refreshed the hearts of the saints. [NASB]

For Paul, the primary resource from the community was the motivation to pray. Praying for Philemon brought Paul immense joy and encouragement. Chaplains must maintain this perspective to avoid becoming cynical and critical when support is lacking.

In addition to prayer, Paul viewed evangelism and good works as essential components of ministry, bringing glory to God through Jesus Christ. The house church of Philemon and its members provided Paul with encouragement during his trials. Chaplains must remain committed to seeking Jesus Christ and His presence in the community to avoid becoming desensitized by the amoral environment they face daily in prison.

Maintaining a fresh perspective for chaplains is crucial, and this is achieved through the peace and rest found in Jesus Christ. Philemon's love for the saints refreshed Paul's heart, echoing the refreshing Jesus spoke of in Matthew 11:28<sup>2</sup> for those who are weary and burdened. Most chaplains agree that the weight of prison ministry can cause significant stress and anguish over time. Knowing there is a brother, church, or resource in the community for refreshment is essential for chaplains to stay rejuvenated.

Developing good community relationships and resources is often slow and challenging for chaplaincy. Many in the religious community, for various reasons, shy away from or avoid prison ministry altogether. It is easy for chaplains to become indignant and demanding of their peers and coworkers. Recognizing this potential issue, Paul writes, "Therefore, although in Christ I could be bold and order you to do what you ought to do, yet I appeal to you on the basis of love. I then, as Paul—an old man and now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus..." [NASB].

Having learned from failed relationships, unfulfilled promises, and abandoned friendships, Paul offers chaplains valuable wisdom when seeking community support. He allows Philemon to respond willingly out of love for Jesus Christ, avoiding manipulation or guilt. Paul wanted Philemon to witness the marvelous work of redemption, reconciliation, and restoration by participating in Onesimus's transformation.

Often, it is not until a local church willingly participates in prison ministry, moved by the Holy Spirit, that they see the true heart of God in His redeeming work through Jesus Christ. Many churches have experienced revival by participating in prison ministry and witnessing lives the world deems worthless transformed into sparkling gems of God's reclaimed handiwork.

### **The Essential Power of Chaplaincy Lies in Redemption**

Many religious organizations volunteer in prisons primarily to count the number of souls entering heaven. However, Paul's understanding of a man saved in prison was not about numbers but about the limitless and matchless grace of God. He writes, "I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, who became my son while I was in chains. Formerly he was useless to you, but now he has become useful both to you and to me. I am sending him—who is my very heart—back to you." Onesimus was not a statistic or a mere number to boast about; he was the very heart and soul of Paul's life and love for Jesus Christ.

No program, power, or person in this world or the next can transform the worst criminal into someone beloved by the church. Chaplains have the privilege of witnessing lives redeemed from the world's sinful ways, becoming like sons and daughters to them. Jesus said in Luke 7:47, "Wherefore I say unto thee, Her sins, which are many, are forgiven; for she loved much: but to whom little is forgiven, [the same] loveth little." The love of a chaplain for a sinful, wretched person redeemed by the grace of God is priceless and represents the true power of chaplaincy in the eyes of God.

A chaplain must possess a passionate heart for prisoners and the ministry of the Gospel. Without this passion, over time, inmates who fake salvation to gain favor, manipulate the system to achieve parole, or seek handouts from the church will disappoint, discourage, and drain the chaplain's soul.

This disillusionment can also lead the administration to question the necessity of religion as an essential element of inmate treatment. "Jailhouse religion" has long been a joke in corrections, and chaplains must endure continual laughter, mockery, and embarrassment due to fake Christianity. As society grows darker, some prisons have sought to remove religion from offender rehabilitation altogether. Therefore, it is imperative that chaplaincy discovers its true power and purpose for its existence.

### **Chaplaincy's Purpose in Reconciliation**

Among the many religious terms used within the Christian community, "reconciliation" holds significant weight for both inmates and chaplains. In 2 Corinthians 5:18, Paul writes, "All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation." Thousands of incarcerated individuals yearn for their victims' forgiveness and reconciliation. This concept deeply resonates with many inmates as they continually reflect on their past actions.

When a chaplain preaches about reconciliation, it captures the attention of the incarcerated. Paul's words in Philemon 15, "Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back forever," offer a profound perspective on the inmates' actions within the framework of a sovereign God.

Understanding their circumstances is a significant part of an inmate's introspection. The question, "Why me?" is often pondered throughout their sentence. When a chaplain explains that their experiences are part of God's plan for redemption, it does not excuse the crime or diminish its impact on the victims. However, it helps inmates view their lives from an eternal perspective, aligning with the chaplaincy's mission.

The hope that God may forgive their actions transforms the daily routines of the chaplain's ministry. Having served several years on death row in the Virginia Correctional system, I frequently encountered the question, "How do I make peace with God?" The chaplain's role in explaining the significance of Jesus Christ's sacrifice provides inmates with a realization that their lives hold meaning and purpose to God.

The theological foundation for prison ministry is encapsulated in the verse, “Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back forever.” This perspective of temporary separation leading to eternal reconciliation underpins the chaplain’s work. The cycle of crime, rebellion, and restoration is a recurring theme in Scripture, illustrated by the prodigal son, the nation of Israel, and other examples of God’s sovereign grace and mercy. The story of Philemon and Onesimus offers a clear vision and focus for prison ministry, emphasizing the transformative power of reconciliation.

### **Chaplaincy’s Potential for Restoration**

The Encarta Dictionary<sup>3</sup> defines restoration as “the return of something that was removed or abolished” or “a model made to resemble or represent something in its original condition.” When Paul writes to Philemon, “Which in time past was to thee unprofitable, but now profitable to thee and to me,” he encapsulates the essence of prison ministry both practically and theologically.

Practically, Philemon was to receive Onesimus back as a transformed and productive individual. Theologically, Onesimus was recreated in the image of Jesus Christ through faith. What sin had damaged, faith in Christ and His redemptive blood has restored. Although we await our redemptive bodies, our lives are to be lived in the image of Jesus Christ as our model.

Restoring Onesimus through sanctification is a significant part of chaplaincy. Discipleship should always be the core of all programming in the prison’s religious community. Finding Christian role models and mentors in the correctional setting is often challenging. Many volunteers prefer to preach the Gospel, see men saved, and move on to the next prison. The chaplain must continually challenge and train prison volunteers in discipleship and mentoring.

Like the twelve disciples who brought their faults, failures, and burdens into the life of Christ, inmates are no different. However, their problems often require intense counseling, enormous grace, and forgiveness. Today’s shallow Christianity often falls short in helping someone like this. It was no different for Philemon in the early church. That is why Paul encourages him to take back Onesimus with willing love. Doing so allows the inmate, the church, and the Holy Spirit to experience true restoration. Therefore, the most intense process for the chaplain is the daily sanctification of the inmate before release.

### **Chaplaincy’s Work in Regeneration**

Paul writes in Titus 3:5, “He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit,” and in 3:8, “so that those who have believed God will be careful to engage in good deeds. These things are good and profitable for men.” The unique element of redemption that surpasses all other programs is regeneration. The chaplain must focus on transforming, not merely reforming, the inmate through rebirth into a new life in Christ. Regeneration signifies a completely new life, distinct from restoration, which implies a return to a previous state.

Developing new thought patterns, decision-making processes, and worldviews requires intense study and time. Chaplaincy must effectively cleanse the slate of a world filled with corruption, addiction, and various forms of sordid behavior. This task is neither easy nor widely sought after in Christian ministry. Many pastors avoid prison ministry due to concerns about the ex-offender’s ability to be easily swayed and transformed like other congregants.

However, the joy found in regenerating an individual who, after discipleship, can minister to others is indescribable. Paul writes, “Whom I wished to keep with me, so that on your behalf he might minister to me in my

imprisonment for the gospel.” The training Paul provided to Onesimus was effective, as he grew to minister with the same capability as Philemon.

Inmates often absorb the living word with intense passion, surpassing the average congregant in their growth and ability to develop ministry. Developing spiritual gifts, biblical understanding, and ministerial growth should extend beyond the prison term to post-release life. Inmates should be prepared for ministry to their family, friends, and community.

### **Chaplaincy’s Responsibility for Preparation**

Preparing inmates for reintegration into society involves more than simple discipleship and Bible study. Efforts must be made to prepare both the community and the inmate for their connection. When Paul writes, “If then you regard me a partner, accept him as you would me,” he prepares Philemon in a manner that goes beyond a mere recommendation or referral. He equates Onesimus to his own standing and relationship with Philemon.

Paul essentially instructs Philemon to treat the ex-slave who betrayed and possibly stole from him as if he were Paul, the great apostle of God. This directive forces Philemon to remove all prejudices, biases, and resentful feelings that could lead to retaliation and rejection. Unfortunately, many churches accept inmates at a distance but rarely offer them special treatment or a prominent position. The chaplain must work diligently to prepare the community for ex-offenders and vice versa.

This preparation also involves Onesimus assuming responsibility and accountability to Paul, his spiritual father. Onesimus must uphold the same level of Christianity as Paul, a challenge many inmates fail to meet post-release. Paul’s elevation of Onesimus challenges all aspects of Christian theology and faith. If one truly believes in God’s power to redeem, reconcile, restore, and regenerate, this belief must be demonstrated through acts of forgiveness and acceptance.

In the early church, Philemon’s fellowship faced the risk of losing their lives, social status, or possessions due to ongoing persecution. Declaring someone a brother in the Lord signaled an instant trust with one’s life. Paul wrote, “You’re getting him back now for good—and no mere slave this time, but a true Christian brother! That’s what he was to me—he’ll be even more than that to you.” This was not merely a letter of acceptance into a church but a declaration of status.

Therefore, the chaplain’s task is not to hastily endorse any inmate or provide superficial recommendations to local churches. The chaplain must be willing to lay down his life for the inmate and trust him with his own family. This concept is particularly challenging in today’s evangelical climate of shallow Christianity. If the chaplain’s ministry of transformation is effective, providing restitution for the inmate will come naturally.

### **Chaplaincy’s Responsibility Concerning Restitution**

In theological perspectives, chaplaincy often falls short in addressing restitution. A new movement, spearheaded by the organization Restorative Justice<sup>4</sup>, focuses on the offender, the victim, and restitution. Following biblical principles, they provide a foundation for the offender to repay the victim, repair psychological trauma, and restore what was stolen. Paul takes on a significant challenge when he writes, “But if he has wronged you in any way or owes you anything, charge that to my account; I am writing this with my own hand, I will repay it (not to mention to you that you owe to me even your own self as well)” (NASB).

It may have been Philemon’s indebtedness to Paul that motivated Paul to agree to repay and restore what Onesimus had stolen. While chaplains across the country might quickly become paupers in this process, it does not absolve them of the responsibility to encourage inmates to attempt restitution, both physically and mentally.

Currently, restitution is often viewed as the offender repaying the government, courts, and law enforcement through the time they serve. However, little is done to involve the victim in this process. Paul demonstrates this concept with Philemon by challenging him to accept Paul's down payment and promise of repayment for Onesimus's restitution. Our current system would benefit from keeping the victim involved in the process of punishment and restitution.

## Conclusion

The perspective of prison chaplaincy has evolved significantly alongside the rising incarceration statistics. From humble beginnings as simple country preachers in housing units to becoming well-trained professional chaplains, the field has undergone substantial transformations. One crucial aspect that has often been overlooked is the use of Philemon as a valuable theological framework for prison ministry.

Chaplaincy's purpose in building relationships in the community, in understanding the power of redemption, in reconciliation, potential for restoration, work in regeneration, and responsibility concerning restitution are all deeply rooted in biblical principles. By embracing the teachings found in Philemon, chaplains can develop a more profound and impactful ministry within correctional facilities. This small letter provides a guide and foundation for addressing the spiritual and emotional needs of inmates, fostering their transformation and reintegration into society.

If each chaplain were to utilize Philemon as a cornerstone for their ministry, many chaplaincy programs would witness the same transformative impact and results that Paul and Philemon experienced through Onesimus. This approach not only aligns with theological principles but also addresses the practical aspects of prison ministry, ultimately leading to a more effective and meaningful chaplaincy.

11	<p><b>Reading Assignment:</b> A commentary on the Epistle of Philemon.</p> <p>Submit your own praxis for a prison ministry you may be seeking or supervising by following the key concepts Epistle in Philemon.</p>	<p>Review the previous essay, <i>Culturing Pearls</i>, to identify if the various sections are relevant, adaptable, or need extra work.</p>
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<sup>1</sup> Performance or application of skill, the practical side and application of something such as a professional skill, as opposed to its theory  
Praxis for Prison Ministry

<sup>2</sup> Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Strong's Concordance: take ease, refresh, give rest

<sup>3</sup> Microsoft Word, Encarta Dictionary Reference Program

<sup>4</sup> Restorative Justice online found at, <http://www.restorativejustice.org/> A working definition can be found at [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Restorative\\_justice](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Restorative_justice) "**Restorative justice** is a broad term which encompasses a growing social movement to institutionalize peaceful approaches to harm, problem-solving and violations of legal and human rights. These range from international peacemaking tribunals such as the South Africa [Truth and Reconciliation Commission](#) to innovations within the criminal and juvenile justice systems, schools, social services and communities. Rather than privileging the law, professionals and the state, restorative resolutions engage those who are harmed, wrongdoers and their affected communities in search of solutions that promote repair, reconciliation and the rebuilding of relationships. Restorative justice seeks to build partnerships to reestablish mutual responsibility for constructive responses to wrongdoing within our communities. Restorative approaches seek a balanced approach to the needs of the victim, wrongdoer and community through processes that preserve the safety and dignity of all", as defined by the Suffolk University, College of Arts & Sciences, Center for Restorative Justice.