Preschool–Grade 6

Paul and Onesimus

Sunday School Lesson for 3rd to 5th Grade, 45–60 minutes

Main point: Jesus changes lives and makes us one family, so we welcome each other and help make things right.
Bible passage: Philemon 1:1–25. Read it before class.
Memory verse: "Not now as a servant, but above a servant, a brother beloved, specially to me, but how much more unto thee, both in the flesh, and in the Lord?" *Philemon 1:16 (KJV)*
You need: a Bible for each child (or one for every two children), paper and a pencil for each child, a whiteboard or large paper, a marker, and one take-home sheet for each child.
Before class: write the memory verse on the board.

1. Opening game: Useful or Not? (5–10 minutes)

Name each item. Kids give a thumbs up if it's useful and a thumbs down if it isn't: a broken pencil, a sharp pencil, a flat ball, a ball full of air, a dead flashlight, a flashlight with new batteries. Ask: *What changed each thing from useless to useful? Can a person change like that?* Say: "Today we'll read a real letter where Paul says a man named Onesimus used to be 'unprofitable', not useful, but now he is 'profitable'. Let's find out what changed him."

2. Bible story: A Letter for Onesimus (15 minutes)

Kids open their Bibles to Philemon, near the end of the New Testament. It is one short chapter, a real letter. When you reach a **Look up** line, a child finds the verse and reads it out loud. Tell the rest in your own words.

Who wrote it. Look up Philemon 1:1–2. Paul calls himself "a prisoner of Jesus Christ." He and Timothy write to Philemon, a **fellowlabourer** (someone who works for the Lord with them), and to the church that met in Philemon's house. Paul thanks God for Philemon's love and faith toward the Lord Jesus and all the saints (1:4–5), and says the hearts of the saints are **refreshed**, cheered up, by him (1:7).

A son in the faith. Look up Philemon 1:10. Paul **beseeches**, which means begs, for Onesimus, "whom I have begotten in my bonds." **Bonds** means being a prisoner. **Begotten** means Paul became like his father: while Paul was a prisoner, Onesimus came to know the Lord through him. **Look up Philemon 1:11.** Once **unprofitable** (not useful), now **profitable** (useful) to Philemon and to Paul.

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Sent back. Paul sent Onesimus again to Philemon and called him "mine own **bowels**" (1:12), an old way of saying "my very own heart." Paul would have liked to keep him as a helper, but he would do nothing without Philemon agreeing (1:13–14). Onesimus had **departed for a season**, been away for a while, and now Philemon could have him back for ever (1:15).

More than a servant. Look up Philemon 1:16. Onesimus had been Philemon's servant. Now Paul asks Philemon to receive him as "a brother beloved," a brother in the Lord. **Look up Philemon 1:17.** "Receive him as myself": welcome him the way you would welcome Paul.

Put that on mine account. Look up Philemon 1:18–19. "If he hath wronged thee, or oweth thee **ought**" (anything). Paul doesn't say what Onesimus did; he says *if*. Then Paul writes with his own hand, "I will repay it." Paul trusted Philemon to do even more than he asked (1:21), and asked him to get a **lodging**, a room, ready for Paul (1:22). In another letter Paul called Onesimus "a faithful and beloved brother" (Colossians 4:9).

3. Questions to ask (10 minutes)

Thinking questions (no single right answer; let kids talk)

1. Onesimus went from "unprofitable" to "profitable" (Philemon 1:11). What changes in a person's life when they come to Jesus?
2. Paul asked Philemon to receive Onesimus "as myself" (1:17). Why would that make it easier for Philemon to welcome him?
3. Paul offered to pay whatever Onesimus owed (1:18–19). When has someone helped you make something right?
4. Paul asked Philemon instead of ordering him, "for love's sake" (1:8–9). Why is asking with love better than bossing?
5. Who at your school or church needs to be welcomed like family?

Recall questions

1. Who wrote the letter with Paul? *(Timothy, Philemon 1:1)*
2. Where did the church meet? *(In Philemon's house, 1:2)*
3. What did Paul write with his own hand? *("I will repay it," 1:19)*

4. Memory verse: Erase a Word (5 minutes)

Explain the old words: **above a servant** means more than a worker, **a brother beloved** means a brother you love, **specially** means especially, **how much more unto thee** means even more to you, **in the flesh** means in everyday life, and **in the Lord** means as brothers in Jesus. Read the verse on the board together. Erase two words and read it again. Keep erasing two words at a time until the board is empty and the class can say it alone. Then kids say it to a partner.

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5. What this means for us (5 minutes)

Say: "Jesus changed Onesimus. The Bible says, 'if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new' (2 Corinthians 5:17, KJV). God loves you. The Bible says: 'For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God' (Romans 3:23, KJV). That means all of us have done wrong, and none of us is as good as God. Paul offered to pay what Onesimus owed, but Jesus paid for our sins. Jesus is God manifest in the flesh, which means God came to earth as a man (1 Timothy 3:16). Christ died for our sins, was buried, and rose again the third day (1 Corinthians 15:3–4). How do we obey the gospel? 'Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost.' (Acts 2:38, KJV) To **repent** means to turn away from sin; our old self dies (Romans 6:6). We are **buried with Jesus in baptism**, all the way under the water, in Jesus' name. **Remission** means our sins are washed away, and we come up to live a new life (Romans 6:4; Acts 22:16). And God fills us with the **Holy Ghost**, and we speak with other tongues as the Spirit gives the words (Acts 2:4). The Bible calls this being born again (John 3:5)."

Pray with the kids, and encourage them to talk with their parents and pastor about being baptized in Jesus' name and filled with the Holy Ghost. Never pressure a child.

This week: welcome someone like family, and if you have wronged someone, help make it right.

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6. Activity: Bible Look-Up Race (10–15 minutes)

Kids work in pairs with one Bible. Read a reference and a question. The first pair to find the verse and read the answer out loud wins the point.

1. Philemon 1:1: What did Paul call himself? *(A prisoner of Jesus Christ)*
2. Philemon 1:2: Where did the church meet? *(In Philemon's house)*
3. Philemon 1:9: What did Paul call himself here? *(Paul the aged)*
4. Philemon 1:10: What did Paul call Onesimus? *(My son)*
5. Philemon 1:11: What was Onesimus now? *(Profitable to Philemon and to Paul)*
6. Philemon 1:16: How should Philemon receive him? *(As a brother beloved)*
7. Philemon 1:19: How did Paul write this part? *(With his own hand)*
8. Philemon 1:22: What did Paul ask Philemon to prepare? *(A lodging)*

Or choose the **Paul and Onesimus word search** (vbshq.com/puzzles/onesimus-word-search), crossword (vbshq.com/puzzles/onesimus-crossword), maze (vbshq.com/puzzles/onesimus-maze) or worksheet (vbshq.com/worksheets/onesimus-worksheet).

7. Prayer

"Dear God, thank You for changing lives and making us one family in Jesus. Help us welcome others as brothers and sisters, and help us make things right when we do wrong. Thank You for loving us and making a way to save us through Jesus. In Jesus' name, amen."

Keep to what the letter says: Philemon never says Onesimus ran away or stole. It says he "departed for a season" (1:15) and "If he hath wronged thee, or oweth thee ought" (1:18). It also doesn't tell how Philemon answered. If kids ask, say, "The Bible doesn't tell us," and point to what it does say: Paul trusted Philemon to do even more than he asked (1:21).

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