Preschool–Grade 6

Paul and Onesimus

Sunday School Lesson for Preteens (Ages 11–12), 45–60 minutes

Main point: In Jesus, people who were apart become family. Receive others the way Christ received you, and stand with them to make things right.
Bible passage: Philemon 1:1–25. Students read it out loud themselves.
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)* and "Wherefore receive ye one another, as Christ also received us to the glory of God." *Romans 15:7 (KJV)*
You need: a Bible for each student, paper or a notebook and a pen for each student, a whiteboard and a marker, and one take-home sheet for each student.
Before class: read Philemon (it takes about three minutes) and Colossians 4:7–9. Write both memory verses on the board.

1. Opening game: Would You Vouch for Them? (5–10 minutes)

Read each situation. Students answer "yes," "no" or "it depends," and say why. 1) A new kid asks to join your group project. 2) A friend who broke your stuff last month says sorry and wants to be friends again. 3) Someone you don't know well needs a person to say, "I'll stand with them." Ask: *What does it cost to stand up for someone? Would you put your own name on the line for them?* Say: "Today we'll read a letter where Paul put his own name, and his own money, on the line for someone."

2. Bible story: Students Read It (15 minutes)

Read out loud: Philemon 1:1–25. It is one short chapter. Students take turns, a few verses each. Old words in this letter:

- **fellowlabourer** (1:1): co-worker for the Lord; **fellowsoldier** (1:2): a fellow soldier, one who serves the Lord beside them; **the church in thy house** (1:2): the church that met in Philemon's home
- **bowels** (1:7, 1:12, 1:20): an old word for the heart, deep love; **refreshed**: cheered up, strengthened
- **enjoin thee that which is convenient** (1:8): command you to do what is right; **beseech** (1:9–10): beg, ask strongly; **the aged** (1:9): an old man
- **begotten in my bonds** (1:10): Onesimus came to know the Lord through Paul while Paul was a prisoner
- **unprofitable / profitable** (1:11): not useful / useful
- **retained** (1:13): kept; **without thy mind** (1:14): without your agreement; **of necessity**: because you had to
- **departed for a season** (1:15): was away for a while
- **count me a partner** (1:17): think of me as your partner; **ought** (1:18): anything; **put that on mine account**: charge it to me
- **lodging** (1:22): a place to stay; **salute** (1:23): greet

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3. Questions to ask (15 minutes)

1. Paul says he could "enjoin," command, Philemon, but "for love's sake" he asks instead (Philemon 1:8–9). Why do you think he chose to ask?
2. Onesimus was "unprofitable" and is now "profitable" (1:11). What does that say about what Jesus can do with a person's past?
3. Paul writes, "perhaps he therefore departed for a season, that thou shouldest receive him for ever" (1:15). How can God bring good out of a hard situation?
4. "Not now as a servant, but above a servant, a brother beloved" (1:16). How does being family in the Lord change the way people treat each other? (See Galatians 3:28.)
5. Paul says, "put that on mine account... I will repay it" (1:18–19). How is that a picture of what Jesus did for us? How can you help someone make things right?
6. Romans 15:7 says to receive one another "as Christ also received us." Who is hard for you to receive? What would it look like to do it anyway?

4. Memory verse (5 minutes)

Old words in Philemon 1:16: **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; **in the Lord** means as brothers in Jesus. In Romans 15:7, **wherefore** means so, and **receive** means welcome.
Read both verses together. Then students cover one phrase at a time and quiz a partner. Say Philemon 1:16 this week; keep working on Romans 15:7 next week too.

5. What this means for us (5–10 minutes)

Say: "Onesimus was begotten, born into God's family, through the gospel Paul preached. '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, and 'all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God' (Romans 3:23, KJV). Paul offered to pay Onesimus' debt; Jesus paid ours. Jesus is God manifest in the flesh, God who came as a man (1 Timothy 3:16). 'Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures; and that he was buried, and that he rose again the third day according to the scriptures' (1 Corinthians 15:3–4, KJV). We obey the gospel the way Peter preached it: '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) We **repent**, turning from sin, and our old self dies (Romans 6:6). We are buried with Jesus by baptism in His name, all the way under the water. **Remission** means our sins are washed away, and we rise to walk in newness of life, a brand-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 utterance, which means as He gives the words (Acts 2:4). Jesus called this being born of water and of the Spirit (John 3:5)."
Pray with the students, 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.

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6. Activity: Journal (10 minutes)

Each student writes privately. No one has to share. Write these three prompts on the board:

1. What has Jesus changed in my life, or what do I want Him to change? Write a "before" and an "after," like Philemon 1:11.
2. Is there someone I need to receive as a brother or sister, or someone I need to make things right with? What is one step I can take?
3. Write a short letter, like Paul did, to someone who needs to be welcomed or encouraged. You can give it to them this week.
   If there is time, invite a few volunteers to share one sentence.

This week: stand with someone who needs a friend, and if you owe someone an apology, make it right.

7. Prayer

"Dear God, thank You for receiving us and making us new in Jesus. Help us receive one another as You received us, stand up for people who need a friend, and make things right when we have done 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). The letter doesn't tell how Philemon answered. In another letter, Paul called Onesimus "a faithful and beloved brother, who is one of you" (Colossians 4:9). If students ask about servants in Paul's day, answer simply: Onesimus had been Philemon's servant, and in the Lord he became his brother (Philemon 1:16; Galatians 3:28).

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