



istock photo – Decision

Do the right thing?  
Do the thing right?

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Every leader has to make decisions on whether to do a thing right, or do the right thing. Sometimes, the facts, choices, values and consequences for decision-making are unclear. When that happens, the task is tough, especially when stakes are high.

The Good News is that we have a concise case study in Scripture, which can guide us with difficult decisions. Paul's Letter to Philemon focuses on: *doing the right thing* versus *doing the thing right*. And, his letter is short! It's only one chapter and reads like a business memo. Following is a **précis** of Paul's letter, with background information on its three characters:

**Philemon**

well known  
\*Roman citizen  
wealthy – had slave  
friend of Paul  
Christian convert

**Onesimus**

exceptional worker  
household slave  
ran away  
became Paul's co-worker  
Christian convert

**Paul**

well known & high profile  
\*Roman citizen  
wealthy – knows slavery  
friend of Philemon  
Christian evangelist

\*Roman citizenship was rare and coveted. It gave privileges and opportunities, which the average person did not have.

Paul's **problem** was difficult:

- Onesimus was Philemon's runaway slave, currently teaching with Paul
- it was a crime in Roman Law for slaves to run away
- Jesus taught: *Slaves, obey your masters*
- does Paul surrender Onesimus to Philemon? - *do the thing right*
- does Paul protect his friendships with Philemon and Onesimus? - *do the right thing*

## **Resolution**

Paul's fact-finding on law and Christ's values helped him to write his letter to Philemon:

- Onesimus owed a debt for his freedom to Philemon
- Philemon owed debts to Jesus for his love; to Paul for his friendship; to the Church for its nurture.

Paul was a master of persuasion. His letter was to be read publicly, thus putting pressure on Philemon. His wording was gentle, but his points were sharp. He knew that Philemon had discretion in how to apply Rome's law and Jesus' command. He persuaded Philemon to respond to Onesimus in the context of what God had given him – discretionary or unmerited favor (Grace).

## **So What?**

Sometimes, complex problems contain clear points. That still doesn't make resolving them easy. But, what Paul's letter does is remind us how Jesus is present with us in all things. As we turn to him for his insight, guidance and values in our daily living and work, we discover:

- we are never alone –no matter how tough the situation
- Jesus and we can resolve problems, and *do the right thing* with creativity and effective persuasion, for win-win results

So, next time we are caught in the tension between *doing the right thing* and *doing the thing right*, may Paul's Letter to Philemon guide and bless us, with the full potential Jesus offers us.

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