

Philemon – a Case for Truth in Love

Prayer

This morning we will be talking about Paul's letter to Philemon.

Let's start with a definition:

Means "affectionate" in Greek, a derivative of φιλημα (philema) "kiss". Philemon was the recipient of one of Paul's epistles in the New Testament.

The Epistle of Paul to Philemon, known simply as Philemon, is a New Testament book. It is a prison letter, co-authored by Paul the Apostle with Timothy, to Philemon, a leader in the Colossian church. ... It is the shortest of Paul's letters, consisting of only 335 words in the Greek text.

Let's see what it says:

Greeting

From Paul, who is in jail for serving Christ Jesus, and from Timothy, who is like a brother because of our faith.

Philemon, you work with us and are very dear to us. This letter is to you and to the church that meets in your home. It is also to our dear friend Apphia and to Archippus, who serves the Lord as we do.

I pray that God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ will be kind to you and will bless you with peace!

Philemon's Love and Faith

Philemon, each time I mention you in my prayers, I thank God. I hear about your faith in our Lord Jesus and about your love for all of God's people. As you share your faith with others, I pray that they may come to know all the blessings Christ has given us. My friend, your love has made me happy and has greatly encouraged me. It has also cheered the hearts of God's people.

Paul Speaks to Philemon about Onesimus

Christ gives me the courage to tell you what to do. But I would rather ask you to do it simply because of love. Yes, as someone in jail for Christ, I beg you to help Onesimus! He is like a son to me because I led him to Christ here in jail. Before this, he was useless to you, but now he is useful both to you and to me.

Sending Onesimus back to you makes me very sad. I would like to keep him here with me, where he could take your place in helping me while I am here in prison for preaching the good news. But I won't do anything unless you agree to it first. I want your act of kindness to come from your heart, and not be something you feel forced to do.

Perhaps Onesimus was taken from you for a little while so that you could have him back for good, but not as a slave. Onesimus is much more than a slave. To me he is a dear friend, but to you he is even more, both as a person and as a follower of the Lord.

If you consider me a friend because of Christ, then welcome Onesimus as you would welcome me. If he has cheated you or owes you anything, charge it to my account. With my own hand I write: I, PAUL, WILL PAY YOU BACK. But don't forget that you owe me your life. My dear friend and follower of Christ our Lord, please cheer me up by doing this for me.

I am sure you will do all I have asked, and even more. Please get a room ready for me. I hope your prayers will be answered, and I can visit you.

Epaphras is also here in jail for being a follower of Christ Jesus. He sends his greetings, and so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke, who work together with me.

I pray that the Lord Jesus Christ will be kind to you!

Opening Remarks:

Have you ever considered how much you have been forgiven? Has it occurred to each of us this morning that we need to forgive others because we have been forgiven?

Turn with me to Matthew 18:21-22 where we see the example of an official who refused to forgive and so Peter approaches Jesus with a question:

Peter came up to the Lord and asked, "How many times should I forgive someone who does something wrong to me? Is seven times enough?"

Jesus answered:

Not just seven times, but seventy-seven times![a]

- [a] seventy-seven times: Or "seventy times seven." The large number means that one follower should never stop forgiving another.

Our bible gives us such a treasury of richness...

Have you ever considered what the book of Philemon (Affection) is trying to teach us?

Really it is quite simple. It illustrates for us the principles for repairing broken relationships... Did you notice that even as Paul reaches out he takes responsibility for his Christian brother's sin. He uses a Christ-like principle. Just as Jesus Christ stood proxy and paid for us so too is the apostle Paul standing as one who vouches and pays for Onesimus' sin.

Paul engages not just in repairing the breaches but being willing to make things right.

Has anyone here ever had a problem in a relationship with another person?
Yeah, kind of everyone right?

Let's step back for just a sec and ask a quick question. As we go about our daily walk with Christ and work out our faith living a Christian life, does our faith have any impact whatsoever on our relationships with others?

Spoiler alert!

It should... That is what this little NT book is all about.

Let's do some context here shall we?

The book Philemon is named after a wealth businessman from Colossae who came forward in Ephesus and gave his life to Christ. When he returned home to Colossae he decided to host a church in his home. Much like home groups that arise in churches today. This home group was most likely a home group from the main church in Colossae.

Now this businessman Philemon was fairly wealthy and owned many slaves. Slavery was a common practice at the time for anyone who could not pay their debts another way or because of being convicted of a serious crime.

This is relevant because Onesimus who's name actually means: "Useful" was one of Philemon's slaves. The scriptures do not tell us why but Onesimus ran away.

Talk about a God appointment... Onesimus during his flight ran into Paul who told him the good news of Jesus and Onesimus became a Christian.

Now Paul has a problem. He like Onesimus and considered him a spiritual son in the faith, but the law clearly expected him to return Onesimus the runaway slave to his

master. This was a hard place to be in but Paul chose to do the right thing. He sent Onesimus back to Philemon, but sent him with this epistle (Letter) written to Philemon.

What is he doing here?

He is asking Philemon not to see him as a slave, but rather as a brother in Christ and as such, he is requesting that Philemon forgive him his transgressions.

Galatians 3:26-29 CEV

All of you are God's children because of your faith in Christ Jesus. And when you were baptized, it was as though you had put on Christ in the same way you put on new clothes. Faith in Christ Jesus is what makes each of you equal with each other, whether you are a Jew or a Greek, a slave or a free person, a man or a woman. So if you belong to Christ, you are now part of Abraham's family,[a] and you will be given what God has promised.

Footnotes:

- a. you are now part of Abraham's family: Paul tells the Galatians that faith in Jesus Christ is what makes someone a true child of Abraham and of God

So what can we take away from this... What are those relationship restoring nuggets I promised you?

It doesn't matter whether you are working on a personal relationship or working as a third party to restore the relationship between others the principles are the same.

- Speak the truth in love
 - (remember what Paul said to the Ephesians in Eph 4:15)

In your relationships how many of you have experienced the truth used in an attempt to hurt you? You see many people are more than willing to give you a piece of their mind and they may consider it completely and unequivocally the truth, but it is not in love. Conversely, and all too common is people who say loving things but say things to manipulate or control and bypass the truth in what they say.

Paul is the pastor, the apostle and we see him here speaking the truth and telling Philemon what he should do, but he does it through investment of tact, love and concern for both parties involved. He knows Philemon has been wronged, but he appeals to him to forgive and embrace. He knows Onesimus is wrong, but pleads his case.

When people tick-you-off it is difficult to speak truth in love. It requires you to love the other person more than your own sense of being wronged. You might see them as the devil incarnate, you might think they act out of the worst motivations, that they plan evil actions towards your or another, their actions may be appalling and yet Jesus says: Love your enemies, do good to those who spitefully use you. God tells us to find a way to them and that that way is through truth and love.

As a side note here, you can always test to see if what you are going to say passes the truth in love criteria by what you are going to say against 1 Corinthians: 13:4-8a

Love is kind and patient, never jealous, boastful, proud, or rude.

Love isn't selfish or quick tempered. It doesn't keep a record of wrongs that others do.

Love rejoices in the truth, but not in evil.

Love is always supportive, loyal, hopeful, and trusting.

Love never fails!

Does what you're going to say pass those tests? If not... it isn't truth in love.

Have we brought our thoughts captive to the mind of Christ?

Think of it like a little kid who is in trouble and his dad tells he to sit down and be quiet, but the kid says: "NO" so he gets into more trouble and is grounded and so it goes until finally he doesn't want anymore punishment. Finally, resigned he sits down and says: "I'm sitting down, but I'm standing up on the inside!"

Sometimes we ourselves can actually find ourselves in the place of the little boy when God or our leaders instruct us to do the right thing. We see here that Paul is giving Philemon the choice to do the right thing.

Paul starts off with his greeting. He says some nice things to Philemon, but he says things that he truly believes. He encourages, exhorts and edifies him, but doesn't do it to manipulate, he says these things by looking at Philemon's walk and speaks the positives he sees. He is being genuine. Note he is specific in his thanks. This might not seem significant but it is big.

Paul is truthful and persuasive. He works to convince Philemon to take back Onesimus without punishment. He exhorts him to see him as a brother now. He reminds Philemon that Onesimus is not just his slave, but now he is also his brother.

Paul believes that Onesimus has changed for the better. He believes he is a new creation in Christ Jesus and that people can overcome their past, and their hurts etc. I believe this as a pastor of all new Christians that come in. They can overcome, they can be healed and Jesus can change their lives.

Did you notice I pointed out that Onesimus means: "Useful". Note here that Paul says in verse 11: "Formerly, he was useless to you, but now he has become useful to

you and to me. Paul is being funny with his name to break the tension. His message to Philemon is that now saved he is finally living up to his name.

We then see Paul encouraging him when he says: "I am sure you will do all I have asked, and even more..." he is implying: Instead of just forgiving him, you could take the extra step and grant your new brother freedom."

But notice that Paul leaves it up to Philemon to make the right choices. God lets us make relationship choices too. We need to make the right ones.

Paul also tells Philemon that no matter what he decides he is coming to visit soon. He keeps the relationship open.

I don't want to go into details, but in my past as in so many others, someone wronged me. As a result among my friends and associates there were many who told me to disassociate with that person. There were brothers and sisters who said that the person who wronged me believed differently, so I should not try to associate with that person.

My response in each case was simple and truthful. **"Yes, they hurt me, but if I close the door to that person, I have no right to speak into their life. They need my love and support, even if I disagree or have been hurt by their actions. "**

Friends, today that person is serving God and we are friends. What would have happened, if I had responded in my hurt and severed our relationship? I don't know, but I do know one thing. When that person came to me and said thank you for caring and not giving up on me. Thank you for being there when I did not deserve your friendship. I knew, absolutely knew - that speaking truth in love really works.

Martin Luther once wrote, "Even as Christ did for us with God the Father, thus Paul also does for Onesimus with Philemon." Did you catch that? There's a beautiful gospel parallel here in the book of Philemon: Paul is a picture of Christ Jesus, who carefully pleads our case before the Heavenly Father (that's Philemon). We are Onesimus, the runaway slave, the rebellious one, the one who is no longer useful because of our sinfulness. But Christ says that we are useful, not because of anything we've done to deserve being taken back, but because of Christ's own reputation. In his letter to Philemon, Paul says in verse 18, "Whatever he's done against you, charge it to me." And that's what Jesus did for us at Calvary. He said to the Father, "Give me their sin. Whatever they did against you, charge it to me. I'm ready." And that's what enables us to return home and to be useful once again. But we must return home, with letter in hand, signed by Christ, to be useful to the Father. That's what it means to become a Christian.

Prayer