

Sermon 1, Introduction to Philemon

Proposition: This epistle spells out the consequences of the gospel in everyday life by teaching that you need to welcome your fellow Christian as if he were Paul.

- I. Paul greets Philemon and his church family, vv. 1-2
- II. Paul Recounts and Prays for Philemon's Virtues, vv. 3-7
- III. Paul Appeals for Philemon to Welcome Onesimus, vv. 8-21
- IV. Paul Threatens to Visit Philemon, v. 22
- V. Paul Passes on Greetings from Fellow Workers, vv. 23-24
- VI. Paul Blesses Philemon with Grace, v. 25

Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, we begin this morning to look at Philemon. This is the shortest and most personal of all Paul's letters. Also, there is good reason to think that he wrote it not long after arriving in Rome at the end of Acts. Thus, both as a continuation of Acts and for the sake of variety, we are going from the long book of Acts to the short book of Philemon. Today we are going to look at the letter as a whole, with particular emphasis on its main point, which is this: The gospel has consequences for everyday life. One of the biggest of those consequences is that you need to welcome your fellow Christian as if he were the apostle Paul — and really, though Paul doesn't say this explicitly, as if he were Jesus. In other words, the question is not "What would Jesus do?" but "What would I do for Jesus?"

I. Paul greets Philemon and his family, vv. 1-2

This letter starts, as a letter should, with a greeting. Paul names himself and his co-author Timothy, and then he says who he is writing to — Philemon, Apphia, and Archippus. Now, he proceeds to spend the rest of the letter talking to Philemon, who is described as Onesimus' owner and the host of a house church in Colossae. (We know he lives in Colossae because Colossians says that Onesimus lived there: "with him Onesimus, our faithful and beloved brother, who is one of your number" [Col 4:9].)

So we don't know for sure who Apphia and Archippus are. But the most obvious explanation is that they are Philemon's wife and son, and that Paul is writing to the whole family here. He adds that he is writing to the whole church, which is how we know that this letter is for us, not just for Philemon and his family. It's a letter that relates to the church, too. As we will see over the next few weeks of looking at this letter together, the message Paul had for Philemon was relevant not just to Philemon, but to every Christian — hence the address to the church.

II. Paul Recounts and Prays for Philemon's Virtues, vv. 3-7

Paul does not start the letter by saying "Welcome Onesimus." He takes his time getting to the point he wants to make, and the time is spent in saying that a lot of "Christian words", as I call them, apply to Philemon. Thus, he begins as he does all his letters, with an apostolic greeting. We do this in our church every week too. I open the service by standing up and giving you grace

and peace from God and Jesus. Why do I do that? Because where else can you get grace and peace? These are things that God gives to His people — unmerited favor and the union of the appetite's inclinations. These things are divine gifts. No one other than Him can give them. And so that's why we put them on you whenever you come to church! That's why Paul blessed Philemon with these things.

He also spoke of many other virtues that Philemon had, either in his character, as a gift from God, or both. We are going to talk about these in greater detail next week. For now, though, I want you to see that Paul not only conveys grace from God to Philemon, but also sends prayers for Philemon back the other way to God. Paul acts as a mediator on behalf of his child Philemon. Do you seek to convey God's grace and peace to your fellow Christians? Do you pray for them, asking God to make their faith effective?

Paul was motivated in his prayers for Philemon by the reality of Philemon's godliness. Faith, love and knowledge are the three "good things" in Philemon that Paul names here.

When you know that a fellow Christian is full of faith, love, and knowledge, do you keep praying for him? Or do you say, "You know what? Other things are more urgent than prayer for this guy who is full of faith, love, and knowledge"? I mean, think about it. What else is there to the Christian life? Historically, Christian teaching has been broken down into three sectors: The doctrinal, which is knowledge; the ethical, which is love; and the devotional, which is faith. A person who has faith, love, and knowledge is someone who is conversant with the three traditional loci of Christian teaching — the Creed, the commandments, and the Lord's Prayer. That's where Philemon was!

And this, of course, is the glory of Scripture, including this little letter called Philemon. It addresses people at every point in their Christian walk. This book is relevant to non-believers, as it presents to them the whole new world of thought and life that they will find in Christ if they choose to accept Him. It is relevant to new believers, as it outlines the one major move required of Christians: receiving one another, whatever happened in the past, whatever sins or crimes have been committed, whatever you think about the other person or whatever baggage the relationship carries. And it is relevant to the most mature and godly Christians, of which Philemon is seemingly one. Paul says that he is known for love, for faith, for knowledge. A Christian who has these three things has all he needs to go to Heaven!

The outcome of Philemon's virtues thus far has been refreshment. This is a key word in this letter; it comes up twice. First Paul says that Philemon's virtues have brought refreshment to the hearts of the saints; then, he says that if Philemon does what Paul asks, this will bring refreshment to Paul's heart too. And of course, the word "heart" occurs one more time as a description of Onesimus. Philemon is called to refresh Onesimus as well as Paul. This is not something different than what he's been doing; this is a continuation of the virtuous deeds he's already been involved in, deeds of refreshing the saints.

Do you refresh the saints? If I asked you to exercise love, faith, and knowledge such that it refreshed my heart, would you say, "Oh, yeah! I've been doing that in this church for years"?

Or would you say “Man. I think I drag people down. I can’t remember the last time someone found an encounter with me refreshing”?

Well, wherever you are, this letter is for you. Brothers and sisters, I want you to refresh one another and to refresh me. You’re going to do that by exercising the same virtues that Philemon was called on to exercise. All of this is possible only for one who is already sold out to Christ and committed to following Him. Paul prayed for Philemon’s faith to be effective. Do you pray that for one another and for me?

III. Paul Appeals for Philemon to Welcome Onesimus, vv. 8-21

Well, the main content of the letter is the long appeal that Paul makes on behalf of Onesimus. We’re going to look at this appeal in detail as well. Suffice it to say that the appeal is a model of tact, delicacy, and persuasiveness.

I just read recently about machine politics in Chicago. Apparently every once in a while someone will get fed up with a city government that doesn’t work and they will run as an outsider, someone who doesn’t owe anyone anything. Then, in even rarer circumstances, they get elected — and it quickly becomes apparent that no one owes them anything either. They can’t get anything done, and their mayorship is a political disaster. This particular article seemed to hint that such a thing has happened to Lori Lightfoot. But regardless of the particularities of politics in American cities, I want to illustrate that the opposite of that dynamic is at work here. Paul doesn’t write as an outsider who doesn’t owe anyone anything. Rather, he writes as someone who has done a host of favors for Philemon and Onesimus, and he is unashamed to call in those favors. “Philemon, you owe me yourself,” the apostle says. He writes also that he has become a father to Onesimus. In parallel to calling in a major favor from Philemon, he simultaneously offers another major favor to Onesimus and Philemon both: “I will repay anything Onesimus stole from you,” he tells Philemon.

So at the same time, he asks for a favor and offers another one. Brothers and sisters, this too is how the church is supposed to work. You should have a close enough relationship, and a relationship of enough mutual advantage, with your fellow believers, that you can ask them for favors and offer them major favors, all at the same time.

We like our independence. We would rather be the outsider who can clean house. The mythology of the lone gunman who comes to town, fixes things, and rides off into the sunset is written deep in our Western hearts. While that mythology has obvious mythic resonances with what Jesus did to save the world, that is not the primary mode of operation for His followers. It’s not even our secondary mode of operation. You and I are pretty much never going to get to operate like that. Rather, we need to be a lot more like Paul. Christ was independent of everyone but His Father. We are dependent on our fellowman. We need to do favors and call in favors, keeping our relationships in balance as we both love others with everything we’ve got and also accept all the love they’ve got. Some of us prefer to give. Others like to get. God calls us to maximal use of both in the church. Gifts and needs are both present and both necessary.

IV. Paul Threatens to Visit Philemon, v. 22

That's why Paul, having offered a favor — "I'll pay whatever Onesimus owes" — proceeds to immediately invite himself over to Philemon's house. I mean, yes, the guy is obviously hospitable because he hosts the church in his house. I guarantee that's something everyone in this congregation would think long and hard before offering to do. But Paul doesn't say "I'm thinking of coming to Colossae. Sure would be great to see you while I'm there." He does not leave it vague like that. He says "Get your guest room ready, because I'm coming to visit you."

He does a favor and matches it with a request. He sends a request and matches it with a favor. Brothers and sisters, the oh-so-Jewish chutzpah of this fellow can take our breath away! But it also stands up and condemns us as too wimpy in our gifts and needs alike. We don't like offering favors, and we don't like calling in favors. We think that it's slightly terrible to even suggest that the church ought to work like that. But Paul not only says that the church should work like that; he seemingly glories in it. The love we have for one another, this "brother beloved" stuff that takes slavery and turns it into fellowship and welcome — that love is worked out in countless trades and interchanges, whereby we give to one another and receive from one another all day long. That's how God set up the family to work. That's how He set up the church to work. That's how He set up the state to work. I'm not saying that God endorses machine politics. But there is definitely a sense in which we post-Progressive American Christians are unduly suspicious of needing each other and benefiting by trading with each other. Trades make everyone richer in economic terms. Turns out that they have a similar effect on the spiritual world.

V. Paul Passes on Greetings from Fellow Workers, vv. 23-24

Paul passes on greetings from his fellow workers. Philemon knew and loved Epaphras, Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke. That's five people from all over Palestine and Asia Minor. This is a sign of the bonds of love that interconnected the churches in that period, and that still stretch across the miles today. My wife's childhood best friend, a woman she grew up with, is the wife of the pastor in our denomination in Cheyenne. Some of those who disciples and poured into me are at my parents' church in Colorado, others at my seminary in South Carolina, still others near my in-laws in central Pennsylvania. We are connected to worshippers near and far by love, faith, and knowledge. Paul simply says to Philemon, "Live it out. Demas says hi, and that too means that you need to welcome Onesimus as a brother beloved rather than as some kind of wicked fugitive."

Have you thought about it that way? The bonds of love that tie you to your fellow Christians are bonds that require you to walk in love toward *all* your fellow Christians, even the ones that you consider to have majorly wronged you. In other words, this mention of "Luke says hi" is a not a random addition at the end of the letter. It is the penultimate reason that Paul is saying "Welcome him back, Philemon."

VI. Paul Blesses Philemon with Grace, v. 25

And, of course, the ultimate reason that Paul gives is simply this: the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus is gracious — and you better be so too, Philemon! You have received your Lord's grace. Your calling now is to be gracious like the master you serve. I want you to be conformed

to the image of God's Son, and you'll do that by receiving this escaped slave of yours not as an escaped slave, but as a brother beloved.

It's a pretty amazing letter. It is saying that Christianity is practical, that how we treat our fellow Christians is pretty much where faith, love, and knowledge actually become effective. Do you want effective faith? Welcome another as Christ has welcomed you, to the glory of God. Amen.