

Message #3

Philemon 1:4-7

There is a sober thought that we have, as believers, or at least should have, and that thought is there will come a day when Jesus Christ will analyze our lives to determine whether we governed ourselves as an award winner or award loser. There will come a day when we will be seen and known for who we really were and for what we really did (I Cor. 13:12). That thought is humbling because we know we all are finite sinners who aren't perfect. So the thought that one day we will face the Lord and be fully known as we were known by God is very intimidating.

When it comes time for us to face God, it will be a truly blessed moment if the testimony of our lives is one like that of Philemon. If a man like Paul would testify that we have the same kind of character and reputation as Philemon, it will be a joyous moment of praise.

It is very obvious that Philemon was a very successful and influential business man. He was quite wealthy. He used much of his wealth and success to help God's church. He was an amazing man. He apparently had been used by God to help and support Paul personally and Paul loved him and highly esteemed him as a man of God.

Now keep in mind that this letter, as we pointed out last time, is written to four named recipients- Philemon, Apphia, Archippus, and the church. **However, at this point he really zeroes in on Philemon, because the pronoun "you" is singular.** Philemon is the one who was wronged and he is a key man of this church. What Paul wanted Philemon to know here is this:

PAUL CONTINUALLY THANKED GOD FOR PHILEMON AND PRAYED FOR PHILEMON BECAUSE OF WHAT HE CONTINUALLY HEARD ABOUT HIM AND BECAUSE OF WHAT HE CONTINUALLY KNEW ABOUT HIM.

Now let us remember that the driving point behind this letter is to appeal to Philemon to forgive and receive Onesimus back into fellowship in view of the fact that he is now right with God. So as the letter begins, Paul opens with an assessment of Philemon and a prayer that he is making in his behalf in view of that assessment.

Philemon is a quality man of God and that point becomes clear when you read these verses. There are two prayer points brought out here:

PRAYER POINT #1 – Paul continually thanks God for Philemon. **1:4-5**

I want to bring out something right up front that I think is critical. It is critical that key people of God pray for you. It is obviously something very valuable, or else why bother stating this point? Paul wanted Philemon to know that he continually prayed for him.

Now you who are affiliated with this church need to know that we continually pray for everyone in this church by name. We do this as a church and our ladies prayer group does this every Thursday.

It is a wonderful thing to be part of a church where you are actually prayed for specifically and individually. People who go to a church in which there is no regular prayer for them or their families are really shortchanging their spiritual experience.

It is clear from **verse 4** that Paul continually thanked God for Philemon and mentioned him in his prayers continually. Notice carefully to whom Paul is praying “my God” or literally in Greek “the God of me” (τῷ θεῷ μου). By saying this, Paul is acknowledging that he does have a very personal and special relationship with God. God had done things for Paul and used Paul in ways He had not done with others. So having Paul pray specifically to God for you is significant.

Now let us remind ourselves of something logistically important; Paul is in jail and he is praying with a thankful heart. Now when you are in jail there wouldn't appear to be many things that could really make you thankful. The thing that could really make you thankful would be if you got out of jail.

But the memory of Philemon was something that was a real encouragement to Paul even when he was locked up in jail. **As Paul was in jail, he found great joy and delight in thinking about Philemon.** Paul did not think this way about everyone. In fact, when he writes II Timothy, he again is in jail and he is thinking about people, whom he names, of which he has nothing good to say—Demas, Alexander, Hymenaeus, and Philetus. So when Paul says he is thankful for someone like Philemon, it is very important. Paul continually remembered people who were loyal to him and he continually remembered people who were disloyal.

One thing we do see about Paul, time and time again, is that the one thing he could do in jail was pray for churches and pray for people and that is what he did and Philemon was a man high up on his prayer list. **No matter where we find ourselves in life, one thing we may always do is pray. We can be at work, in jail or in a car. One thing we can always do is pray for people.**

We also do see here that there are certain people who come into your life by sovereign direction of God, whom you pray for continually because they are so special to you. Philemon was one such man. Philemon was a real friend to Paul and because of that, Paul continually prayed for him.

As we previously mentioned, Philemon probably had come to faith under the ministry of the Apostle Paul, while he was in Ephesus. He was a wealthy businessman and apparently came to faith under the ministry of the Apostle Paul. He had grown in the Lord and had become a special man and fellow worker of Paul in supporting him and his ministry. In fact, John Knox believed that Philemon became a key man of the Lycus valley or Colossian valley of churches that would include Laodicea, Hieropolis and Colossae.

Paul thanked God for this man. You do not find too many rich, successful businessmen, who love the Word of God and the ministry of God, but Philemon was one such man and Paul continually thanked God for him.

Now the reasons he continually thanked for him was because of what he was hearing. I want to point out that the participle “hearing” is present tense, so this was something he was continually hearing about Philemon.

It wasn't that he got a one time report about Philemon, he kept hearing about the way this man was connected to God. He kept hearing good things about this man's love for the work of God and the church of God. There were two specific reasons why he thanked God:

Reason #1 - Because Paul had heard of Philemon's love. **1:5a**

There is a debate over whether or not the love is for God or for others. It would seem to me that it is both. Paul continually heard of the love that Philemon had for God and the love he had for all the saints. Now the noun “saints” contains an article, which means the specific saints of the Colossae area. Philemon demonstrated his love for God in a way that reached out to “all the saints.”

Reason #2 - Because Paul had heard of Philemon's faith. **1:5b**

Now the word “faith” contains an article “the,” literally “the faith” (την πιστιν). What this immediately means is that Philemon fully believed in the grace/faith message and Gospel that Paul proclaimed. Now this message was a non merit, non works faith message. Since Philemon came to faith in Ephesus, we specifically know from Ephesians 2:8-9 that Paul taught we are saved by grace through faith and not by works.

Now again let us keep in our minds the fact that Paul is going to request that Philemon receive Onesimus back into full fellowship and no longer view him as a worthless slave, but a beloved brother (**v. 16**). Since Philemon was a man who understood grace and faith and he was a man who cared about “all the saints,” he would certainly be in a position to grant grace forgiveness to Onesimus, even though he did not deserve it.

Now grammatically the pronoun “which” that comes after the word “faith” in **verse 5** can qualify both Philemon's love and faith.

Some have argued that this is an odd Greek construction called a chiasm or inverted parallelism that presents the first noun “love” with the second object “all the saints,” and the second noun “faith” with the first object “Lord Jesus.” Those who argue for this say the grammar is very awkward, especially when it comes to having faith in all the saints.

But I don't see the grammatical or theological problem. Philemon had a love for the Lord Jesus Christ and that worked itself out in a love for all of the saints, specifically of the Colossian region.

Also, he had a faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, which led him to having a faith that demonstrated his love in the family of God.

Philemon had a love toward the Lord Jesus and all the saints. Philemon had a saving faith toward the Lord Jesus and a sanctifying faith toward all the saints. So Philemon's faith was such that he continually believed that his work in the church and his love for God and the saints was worth it.

Now you must admit that when you have a businessman with this kind of focus, it is rare.

Since Philemon was known to be a man who loved God and God's people and since he was known to be a man of faith, Paul could thank God for him.

PRAYER POINT #2 – Paul continually prays to God for Philemon. **1:6**

There are specifically two requests that he makes in behalf of Philemon:

Request #1 - Paul prays concerning Philemon's fellowship. **1:6a**

Paul specifically prayed for Philemon and specifically concerning his fellowship of the faith. True Biblical faith has fellowship with all kinds of people who also have true Biblical faith. Now the word "fellowship" literally "the fellowship" (ἡ κοινωνία) is a word that includes the idea of a partner or associate and even a companion sharer (G. Abbott Smith, *Greek Lexicon*, p. 251). This is a beautiful word that speaks of having a communion with other believers in the sense that life is shared. In other words, we actually participate with each other.

Now there are two extremes to this idea of fellowship. There is the extreme in which some people want to stick their noses into other people's business as a busybody just because they want to be in the know. The other extreme is isolationism in which someone isolates himself from the people and has nothing to do with them. Both extremes are wrong.

What God wants in the church is that it be a place where believers share life with each other. Believers associate with each other and care about each other.

Now keep in mind that Philemon is a very successful businessman. He is a very wealthy man. Rich people tend to typically run in a different class of people than average people. Paul was praying that Philemon would have an "effective" fellowship with the people of God in the church. That word "effective" (ενεργής) is one that speaks of very active and powerful (*Ibid.*, p. 153). So Paul is praying that Philemon will have a very powerful and active fellowship with the people of God in that Colossian area.

This is the kind of fellowship we are to have—an active fellowship. Now the specific way we have this fellowship with each other is by using our various gifts and abilities to help each other.

Request #2 - Paul prayed concerning Philemon's knowledge. **1:6b**

Now carefully observe that effective faith comes through knowledge and not just surface knowledge. The word for "knowledge" (ἐπιγινώσκω) speaks of a deep knowledge or knowledge-upon-knowledge level.

The development of faith that produces all good things that may be accomplished for Jesus Christ through a person comes by a deep knowledge of God's Word and will. **Being a great reflection of Jesus Christ requires a deep knowledge of the Word of God.**

This is something most Christians just don't understand. Many wear WWJD (what would Jesus do) bracelets, but to be able to actually think through any situation and determine this requires deep knowledge of God's Word.

For example, there are times when Jesus used strong language against religious leaders. There were times when He used gentle language to sinners. There were times when He violently threw over tables and chased people out of the Temple; then there were other times when He invited any to come to Him. When you read the seven churches of Revelation, there are times when He warns and threatens a church; then there are other times when He praises and encourages a church. To actually be able to sift through all possibilities of what Jesus might do in a particular situation requires a deep grasp of God's Word.

It is one thing to say we have faith; it is quite another to trust God at a deep level that gets things done because we have a deep grasp of His Word.

Now **verse 7** further explains why he prayed so fervently for Philemon. Paul had come to have much joy and comfort in love because the hearts of the saints had been refreshed through this brother. Notice Paul identifies Philemon as brother and later he will identify Onesimus as "brother" (**v. 16**).

The word "refreshed" is a word that means to give rest and refreshment from labor. Apparently Philemon did quite a bit for people in ways that refreshed them.

Now as far as we know, Philemon was not an elder, deacon, pastor or teacher. He was a businessman who was used by God in some powerful ways.

It is clear that Philemon used his wealth to help the church of God and he stands forever in the Scriptures as being a refreshing man of God.

All of this data informs us that Philemon is the kind of man who if someone came to him and said, "I am so sorry for what I did," he would be willing to forgive the individual. He had that kind of depth.

PRACTICAL LESSONS:

1. People in the church need prayer.
2. We do earn a reputation in the church before God. What we do does count.
3. We need a deep knowledge of God's Word so we may function in a true Christlike way.
4. The relationship we have with God comes through faith and when we understand this key point, we begin to grasp grace and are able to demonstrate it to others.