

Love and Faith: Philemon 4-7
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This morning we're going to look at the next few verses in Paul's letter to his friend Philemon. Last week we began our study of this short letter in the New Testament. It's a very unique letter. It's the shortest of Paul's letters, and it is a personal letter written about a personal matter. Paul writes this letter to Philemon, asking Philemon to forgive someone who has deeply wronged him, someone who has sinned against him, someone who has broken his heart. This person is Onesimus, who was a slave who belonged to Philemon. Onesimus apparently stole from Philemon and ran away and fled to Rome. And then something amazing happened. Somehow (we don't know exactly how), but in God's providence and according to God's good and sovereign plan, this runaway slave came into contact with the Apostle Paul himself. While Paul was under house arrest in Rome, Onesimus's path intersected with Paul's. And Onesimus heard the Gospel of Jesus Christ through Paul's ministry. Onesimus had probably already heard about Jesus from his master Philemon, and the other Christians in that household. But his heart had remained hard until this time when he was sitting under Paul's teaching. And God moved in Onesimus's heart in such a way that his heart was softened. Indeed, God removed his heart of stone and replaced it with a heart of flesh. God gave Onesimus a new heart, a heart that would respond to Him and love Him and delight in Him and obey Him. This was the miracle of conversion that happened in Onesimus's life during his time with Paul.

This miraculous story should cause us to stand in awe of God's sovereignty in all things. He is sovereign over every detail in the history of His universe. His providence reigns over every decision that is made by mankind, whether good or evil. It was part of God's plan for Paul to be imprisoned. It was part of His plan for Onesimus to run away from his master and seek refuge in the distant city of Rome. And it was part of God's wonderful plan for these two men to meet, so that God might use Paul's preaching to convict and change the heart of Onesimus.

If you are an unbeliever, you should know that God is in the business of seeking and saving the lost. He is powerful to do this, and He will go to great lengths to accomplish His purposes. You may feel like a runaway, like Onesimus was. Maybe you have run away from family members, or you have run away from responsibility. If you are not trusting in Christ, if you are not a follower of Him, then ultimately you have run away from God. Your heart is hard toward Him. But it is no mistake that you are here this morning, in the fellowship of Christians, listening to the Word of God. God can save you. So be attentive to what God might be doing in your heart right now. This may be the day of salvation for you, as it was for was Onesimus as he listened to Paul explain the Gospel to him.

For those of us who are believers, this story should greatly encourage us to seize every opportunity we have to share the Gospel. God works in mysterious ways, and we never know how or when He will choose to use our witness to convict and change a person's heart. God used Paul while he was imprisoned, and certainly He will use us in the workplace, or at school, in our families, and in our neighborhoods. And as we seek these opportunities, and as we pray for our loved ones who do not know the Lord, we can

trust in our sovereign God who does things like lead a runaway slave to the doorstep of an imprisoned apostle in order that he might hear the Gospel and be changed.

Last week I introduced the main theme of this short letter, which is forgiveness. Paul makes a loving appeal to his friend Philemon to forgive the wrong that Onesimus committed against him. Next week we'll look more closely at that appeal, which Paul makes in the body of his letter, starting in verse 8. This morning we'll focus on verses 4-7, where we see Paul's thanksgiving and prayer for Philemon.

The structure of this letter is the same as the structure of Paul's other letters, only shorter. He begins in verses 1-2 by identifying himself and the recipients of the letter, and then gives a greeting in verse 3, "Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." Then in verses 4-7 he includes a prayer of thanksgiving for Philemon.

This is a common feature of most of his letters. We find similar prayers in the opening verses of other letters, in which Paul gives thanks to God and mentions that he is praying for those whom he's writing to, and commends them for their faith and love. And he does this here in his personal letter to Philemon. He thanks God for Philemon, and he tells Philemon that he is praying for him continually, and he commends Philemon for his faith and love.

Paul is doing a few things here. First of all, he wants to earnestly encourage Philemon and commend him for the grace that he sees in his life. Paul sets a good example for us here of how we ought to recognize and comment on the evidences of grace that are present in one another. We need to encourage each other. This is not for the purpose of building self-esteem or becoming puffed up with pride. It can't be that, because the ultimate focus is not on the individual but on God. Paul is thanking GOD for the love and faith in Philemon's life. And he doesn't keep that thanksgiving to himself. He mentions it to Philemon as a way to encourage him.

This is a very healthy thing. This kind of encouragement glorifies God, because it recognizes that every good thing is from Him. It is also a sign of humility on the part of the one giving the encouragement. When we're wrapped up in ourselves, we would rather receive compliments than give them, and we're more likely to criticize others as a way of elevating ourselves. But the humble person can freely and joyfully point out evidences of grace in others and thank God for them.

This kind of encouragement also edifies the body by spurring others on to greater virtue. This is another thing that Paul is doing here as he commends Philemon. He wants to spur him on to display these godly characteristics all the more. John MacArthur makes this point. He says, "Praise itself, legitimate praise, becomes a nourishing food for virtue and a strong antidote against sin" (sermon on Philemon 4-7). This is the spiritual fruit of God-centered compliments. You recognize an evidence of grace in a person's life, and you go up to them and say, "I thank God for your joyful attitude," "I thank God for your loving service," "I thank God for your patience with the kids in the nursery," "I thank God for your diligent study of God's Word," "I thank God for your perseverance in prayer," etc. You say something like that to someone, and the effect will be a desire for *more* of that virtue and a greater desire to avoid sin. That's the effect that those kinds of compliments can have on us. They can be a motivation for pursuing those godly characteristics all the more.

Specifically, then, Paul's encouraging words here are intended to nourish these virtues in Philemon's life *so that* he will be eager to forgive Onesimus. Paul is preparing Philemon for the request he's going to make beginning in verse 8. So he compliments Philemon's love and faith, in the hope that Philemon's love and faith will rise to the difficult occasion that is facing him.

Now as we look in detail at this prayer of thanksgiving, I want each of us to examine our own lives and think about whether these things are true of us. These things that Paul gives thanks for in Philemon's life, and the things Paul prays for in Philemon's life, how can we grow in these things? And how can we pray for ourselves and for one another, that God's grace will be increasingly evident in our lives?

If you are a believer, then God's grace will be evident in your life in various ways. At the same time, since we're all sinners, there will always be much need for growth. John Calvin commented on this passage, observing that Paul "at the same time prays for that very thing for which he 'gives thanks.'" Then he writes, "Even the most perfect, so long as they live in the world, never have so good ground for congratulation as not to need prayers, that God may grant to them, not only to persevere till the end, but likewise to make progress from day to day" (*Calvin's Commentaries*, vol. XXI, pg. 349).

This is how I want us to think about this passage this morning. What evidences of grace can we see in ourselves and in the lives of those around us, which we can thank God for? And how can we pray for ourselves and those around us, that we might persevere till the end and make progress from day to day. We want to thank God for the grace He has given, and plead with Him for more grace, more sanctification, more change and cleansing and growth in our lives. Like Paul was preparing Philemon for a test of faith, we want to be prepared for whatever the next test of faith will be in our lives. Whether it's forgiving someone, or taking a risk of some other kind . . . whatever it may be, we need to continue growing in these godly characteristics.

Paul begins by thanking God for Philemon's love and faith. Paul has heard from others about these virtues in Philemon's life. In verse 5 he says, I hear of your love and faith. He probably received reports from Epaphras, who was the founder of the church in Colossae and therefore would have known Philemon well. Epaphras was with Paul in Rome at the time he wrote this letter. And Onesimus, after his conversion, could probably look back on his life in Philemon's home and testify to the Christian love and faith that was evident there. Paul has heard from Epaphras and Onesimus and probably others about Philemon's godliness, and he gives thanks to God for this.

The statement in verse 5 is constructed in an interesting way. Paul writes, "I hear of your love and of the faith that you have toward the Lord Jesus and all the saints." The best way to understand this verse is to see that Paul is using a chiasm here. A chiasm is an A-B-B-A pattern. So the inner two pieces go together and the outer two pieces go together. The inner two pieces are "faith" and "the Lord Jesus," and the outer two pieces are "love" and "all the saints." Can you see how that works? Paul is saying the same thing here that he wrote to the Colossian church in Colossians 1:4, "since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints." Paul is saying the same thing to Philemon, but he arranges the words in this chiastic pattern.

Faith toward the Lord Jesus (v. 5)

First of all, let's look at the statement about Philemon's faith in verse 5. Paul thanks God that Philemon has faith in the Lord Jesus. This is fundamental. If there's no

faith in Jesus Christ, there is no spiritual life, no saving grace, no ability to truly forgive or truly love God or worship God or anything. It's through faith in Jesus Christ, and in Jesus Christ alone, that we are saved from the punishment we deserve for our sins. You and I, and every other human being on this earth, is a sinner. We have rebelled against God, and the only just punishment for rebelling against an infinitely holy God, is infinite condemnation. That's why hell has no end. Those who die apart from Christ will be punished forever and ever. But those who have faith in Jesus Christ are forgiven because of Christ's death on the cross. Jesus, who is fully God, is an infinite Being and could therefore bear the punishment for sin and triumph over it. That's what He did on the cross for every person who will trust in Him. Everyone who has faith in Jesus Christ will be forgiven.

This forgiveness is, indeed, something to be thankful for. And even the faith that connects us to that forgiveness is something we should thank God for. That's what Paul is doing here. He is thanking God for Philemon's faith. And God is the appropriate One to thank for this, because God is the One who grants us faith. Wherever there is genuine faith in the Lord Jesus, there is a supernatural work of God going on. So we should marvel as we see in our own hearts that we trust in Christ, and we should marvel as we see in each other a faith in the Lord Jesus.

Love for the saints (v. 5, 7)

The other thing Paul thanks God for in verse 5 is Philemon's love for all the saints. Love is mentioned first, and it corresponds to the phrase "all the saints" at the end of the verse. Paul thanks God because he hears not only of Philemon's faith in the Lord Jesus, but also of his love for all the saints. This is certainly a very significant evidence of grace in a person's life. It is another supernatural working of God's grace. We don't naturally produce self-sacrificing, steadfast love for others. That's something that God works in us, and it's an awesome thing to behold, whether you're on the giving or the receiving end of it. In the quote I read last week from Corrie ten Boom, she realized that she could not forgive this man. But she prayed, "*Jesus, I cannot forgive him. Give me Your forgiveness.*" And God worked in her heart to give her a love for that man that she could not have produced on her own. That's Christian love. That's the love that God begins to instill in us when we become Christians, and He continues to cultivate it in our hearts as we are sanctified.

The letter of 1 John impresses upon us the significance of loving the saints. 1 John 3:14 shows us that true believers will love their fellow Christians, and those who don't are not true believers. John writes, "We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brothers. Whoever does not love abides in death." Of course, our love for each other will be mixed with sin while we're in this life, but that love is present in the heart of every believer.

In verse 7 of Philemon Paul elaborates on this love. I'll come back to verse 6, but continuing on this theme of love, Paul says to Philemon in verse 7, "I have derived much joy and comfort from your love, my brother, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you." That is an awesome thing to be said of a person. And that is a statement that we can each look at and evaluate how we are doing in this respect. Is the love in our hearts bringing joy and comfort to others? Are we generous in meeting the needs of others? Are we refreshing the hearts of the saints?

The word for “heart” here is not the word normally used in the New Testament, *cardia*. Instead, Paul uses the word, *splanchna*, which literally refers to the bowels, the guts. And in the ancient world this was the way they referred the seat of the emotions. Paul is talking about deep and meaningful refreshment. Granting rest and nourishment for fellow believers. This is the kind of love that we must continue to strive for in our lives and in this church. Through this kind of love we will be mutually encouraged and nourished and edified. And through this kind of love God will get much glory, we will receive much joy, and the world around us will see something entirely supernatural and wonderful.

***Koinonia* of Faith**

Finally, we come back to verse 6 where Paul prays for the *koinonia* of faith. This is closely related to the love that is mentioned in verse 5 and 7. This *koinonia*, this fellowship, this unity and belonging together, is what we experience as the body of Christ. We belong to each other. We are united as fellow believers. We have this fellowship in our common faith. That’s what Paul is talking about here.

Because of the way some translations render this verse, and because of the way we use the phrase “sharing your faith,” it might seem that Paul is talking about evangelism here. “I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective . . .” Evangelism is so important, but Paul is getting at something different here. He’s not talking about sharing your faith with unbelievers. He’s talking about the faith we share with other believers. As Christians we have this tremendous fellowship in the faith. We share this common bond. And it’s a bond that unites us more significantly than anything else could.

Paul is praying that this faith which we share as believers will “become effective for the full knowledge of every good thing that is in us for the sake of Christ.” The knowledge that Paul refers to here is experiential knowledge. It isn’t head knowledge. It isn’t intellectual understanding. It’s first-hand, experiential knowledge. And it’s experiential knowledge of every good thing that is in us for the sake of Christ.

Now, not every person has good things in them. In fact, nobody has anything good in them by nature. But every Christian is filled with good things because of what God has done in us. We are new creatures in Christ, and God’s grace is at work within us, changing us and sanctifying us and producing the spiritual fruit of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5:23). These are the good things that are in us for the sake of Christ. These things are being produced in us by God’s grace, and they’re for His glory—they’re for the sake of Christ, for Christ’s glory.

This verse is somewhat difficult to understand, but here’s what I think the essence of the prayer is in verse 6. Paul is preparing Philemon for the appeal he’s going to make in the body of the letter. And Paul’s prayer is that Philemon’s faith, which he shares in unity with the body of believers, will become effective in forgiving Onesimus. And as Philemon exercises his faith in that way, he will *experience* (he will have full knowledge of) every good thing that is in him for the sake of Christ.

You see, when we forgive, when we take a risk of faith, when we love the saints, when we give generously, we come into a fuller knowledge of the good things that are in us as Christians. And that is an exciting way to live. Doing the things that are difficult (or even ridiculous) in the world’s eyes, but the things that are clear evidences of God’s

grace. And as we do these things, we see that, yes, God *is* at work in me. He *is* producing fruit in my life. This is the *koinonia* of faith, that we pray will be effective in bringing us into a deeper, more experiential understanding of the good things God has put in us for the sake of Christ.

In this prayer of thanksgiving that we've looked at this morning, Paul recognizes evidences of grace in Philemon's life and he prays for Philemon's continued growth in exercising his faith. And I encourage us to emulate Paul's example, both in our personal lives and in the lives of our fellow believers. May Grace Church be a place where we recognize and thank God for the grace we see in one another, and we pray for each other, that we will experience that grace more and more.