
The Appreciation and Praise for Philemon

Philemon 1–7

Introduction

We will take up a short series on Paul's letter to Philemon. This is an interesting letter for many reasons. Like the 2nd letter to Timothy, it is intensely personal. We see a lot of how Paul was in his relationships with people. Even in this letter, Christ's saving and transforming work is the foundation for the letter.

Here is the letter:

¹ Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, to Philemon our beloved fellow worker ² and Apphia our sister and Archippus our fellow soldier, and the church in your house:

³ Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

⁴ I thank my God always when I remember you in my prayers, ⁵ because I hear of your love and of the faith that you have toward the Lord Jesus and for all the saints, ⁶ and I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective for the full knowledge of every good thing that is in us for the sake of Christ. ⁷ For I have derived much joy and comfort from your love, my brother, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you.

⁸ Accordingly, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do what is required, ⁹ yet for love's sake I prefer to appeal to you – I, Paul, an old man and now a prisoner also for Christ Jesus – ¹⁰ I appeal to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I became in my imprisonment. ¹¹ (Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful to you and to me.) ¹² I am sending him back to you, sending my very heart. ¹³ I would have been glad to keep him with me, in order that he might serve me on your behalf during my imprisonment for the gospel, ¹⁴ but I preferred to do nothing without your consent in order that your goodness might not be by compulsion but of your own accord. ¹⁵ For this perhaps is why he was parted from you for a while, that you might have him back forever, ¹⁶ no longer as a bondservant but more than a bondservant, as a beloved brother – especially to me, but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord.

¹⁷ So if you consider me your partner, receive him as you would receive me. ¹⁸ If he has wronged you at all, or owes you anything, charge that to my account. ¹⁹ I, Paul, write this with my own hand: I will repay it – to say nothing of your owing me even your own self. ²⁰ Yes, brother, I want some benefit from you in the Lord. Refresh my heart in Christ.

²¹ Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say. ²² At the same time, prepare a guest room for me, for I am hoping that through your prayers I will be graciously given to you.

²³ Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends greetings to you, ²⁴ and so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke, my fellow workers.

²⁵ The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.

This letter raises a difficult question that I want to address briefly so we will be distracted by it in our study. Here is the question:

Why does Paul not command Philemon to set Onesimus, his slave, free?

- Philemon owns Onesimus. They have a master-slave relationship.
- Onesimus has become a believer. They have a Christian relationship.
- Since slavery is evil, Paul should correct Philemon and demand Onesimus' release.
- This letter is the perfect opportunity for abolition of slavery and an order from the Lord for emancipation.

As you can imagine, particularly in the current “woke” environment, this is a very problematic text. But it is not the only one:

Ephesians 6:5-9

⁵ Bondservants, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling, with a sincere heart, as you would Christ, ⁶ not by the way of eye-service, as people-pleasers, but as bondservants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart, ⁷ rendering service with a good will as to the Lord and not to man, ⁸ knowing that whatever good anyone does, this he will receive back from the Lord, whether he is a bondservant or is free. ⁹ Masters, do the same to them, and stop your threatening, knowing that he who is both their Master and yours is in heaven, and that there is no partiality with him.

Colossians 3:22-4:1

²² Bondservants, obey in everything those who are your earthly masters, not by way of eye-service, as people-pleasers, but with sincerity of heart, fearing the Lord. ²³ Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men, ²⁴ knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ. ²⁵ For the wrongdoer will be paid back for the wrong he has done, and there is no partiality.

4 Masters, treat your bondservants justly and fairly, knowing that you also have a Master in heaven.

It is understandable that Christian slaves are being directed on how to please God and serve their master well. What is hard to wrap our minds around is that Paul tells Christian masters how to treat their slaves. He could have simply said, “Masters, release your slaves

and in such sacrifice, show the love of God and be pleasing to Him." *But he does not do that...*

How are we to understand that? Several observations can be made. Under the Mosaic Law:

1. Slavery was acknowledged and regulated, but not forbidden.
2. Slave trading, man-stealing was forbidden.
3. Slaves could be acquired by war.
4. A person could indenture themselves for financial reasons. The terms were limited and could not include the children as also slaves.

Slavery was common in the culture of Jesus' and Paul's day. Both Paul and Peter address it directly. They do what the Mosaic Law did: they regulate the conduct of masters and slaves without trying to do away with it. In all of Paul's lists in which he addresses the sins in the culture that were affecting the church, slavery is not one of them. The New Testament seems little concerned about all the great social evils of their day... and there were many of them. Slavery, abortion, infanticide, all kinds of sexual perversions, destruction of private property and human rights, wars of conquest against other nations, not to mention the grotesque evils within the pagan temples. The New Testament condemns the evils of the day but is most concerned that they don't come into the church. In the New Covenant, we as Christians are to treat each other as brothers and sisters regardless of our social standing or relationship.

Am I approving of slavery? No. But the Bible addresses our relationships within the context of the church - not the building, but the spiritual connection we all have. Today, in our setting, slavery is not an issue. But social, ethnic, and financial status all are in the church, carefully masked and often accepted. It is easy to get all worked up over what are not our issues while ignoring the ones that we do struggle with.

What slavery is more significant in this little letter? What Paul is concerned about is Onesimus' emancipation from the slavery of sin. The implications of that deliverance is the heartbeat of this letter. That Onesimus has been set free from sin and have become a son of God radically changes his relationship with Philemon. That is what Paul is homed in on with laser-like intensity.

Keep in mind that he is writing this while being *imprisoned* illegally and unlawfully in Rome. When Paul speaks of chains and shackles, he well knows what that means and how it feels.

This is a deeply personal letter. It is filled with the kind of affirmations and exhortations that can only be sent across strong relational bridges. It is from Paul to a man in the church at Colosse named Philemon. So in some ways it is more like the letters to Timothy and to Titus. It is likely that it was read to the whole church. This will follow the letter format common in that day.

Let's open the letter together and just hear Paul's appreciation and praise for his dear friend, Philemon.

As a Family Man (1–3)

¹ Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, to Philemon our beloved fellow worker ² and Apphia our sister and Archippus our fellow soldier, and the church in your house: ³ Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

The Senders (v,1)

Paul opens the letter by identifying the two people who are sending this...

Paul identifies himself as one who is imprisoned for the sake of Jesus Christ. He writes, not holding up his apostolic authority, but his personal status. He is also highlighting what serving Christ Jesus has cost him.

Paul also seems to be saying that Timothy is one of the senders. It is not just that Timothy is “with Paul.” Paul and Timothy to... He highlights that Timothy is... our brother. Timothy is almost always identified as someone who is serving with Paul as a comrade in the Gospel. Yet, here, Timothy is our brother.

This letter is coming from a prisoner and a brother. Could it be that Paul is preparing Philemon for what is to follow?

The Recipients (v.2)

The recipients are Philemon, his family, and the church that is in his home.

Philemon’s name is a form of the word for *brother*. To the *Brother* who is our beloved *brother*, Paul almost exclaims. These are not just sentimental words that have no basis in reality. Even this personal letter is written at God’s initiation and carried along by the Spirit’s inspiration. How often do we throw words of endearment around and really don’t have the affections those words express?

Beloved is a powerful word in the New Testament. It points us to Christ who is the beloved of the Father. God loves His Son. This is nonsense if it does not involve feelings of affection. The Son is beloved of the Father. He is to be loved by us. The overflow of love for Christ spills out as love for others. The word here is *agape*. D.A. Carson has made a case that we should not make a hard distinction between *phileo* and *agape*. But these sweet words actually say, “To one who loves as friends who is my deeply loved one. Can you say to people, with genuine affection, you are beloved?”

Philemon is a beloved *fellow worker*. This is one word that requires two words to translate. I love that Paul, from a distance, recognizes that Philemon’s work in the church at Colossae means that they are working together.

His wife’s name is Apphia. She is a Christian. She is identified as a sister.

Philemon’s son’s name is Archippus. Archippus is described as a *fellow soldier*. Only Epaphroditus, an elder in the church at Philippi, is also identified as a *fellow soldier*. This is high praise. Archippus is a gospel warrior. But he did receive an exhortation which was given to him in Colossians 4:17, “And say to Archippus, ‘See that you fulfill the ministry that you have received in the Lord.’”

Paul is also writing to the church in Philemon's house. Several times Paul will refer to a church as being in or as meeting in a house. In the early church, this was common. At Rome, it may be that the church at Rome met in several homes but was still identified as a single church. Here, Paul speaking of "the church". This is the church in Colossae. There are a few connections between this letter and the letter to the Colossians. These connections are why we are doing these two books one after the other. Keep in mind then that Paul is writing to the church at Colossae who meets in Philemon's home and among whom Archippus serves as a fellow soldier and Philemon serves as fellow worker.

The Greeting (v.3)

The greeting is almost standard for Paul: "Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." Here is the foundation of their relationship. God's grace and made them one. God's peace rules their relationship. But in the on-going struggles of life, ongoing infusions of God's grace and peace are needed. In these greetings, there prayer wishes, we are reminded of the importance of the different persons of the Godhead.

We are related to the Father as children, as sons and daughters. He is the one to whom our prayers and petitions are addressed. He is the Sovereign source of enabling grace and calming peace.

We are related to Jesus as our Lord and Messiah. He is our Master, our Lord, our Ruler. He is also our groom but that is much less commonly used. The Lord Jesus Christ is an oft repeated designation. Enabling grace and calming peace come through Jesus as Lord and Messiah. These titles are not meant to invoke craven fear. Rather, they are to assure us as we bow to Him and as we depend on Him.

As a Faithful Man (4–5)

Philemon is a family man who is serving both his earthly and his spiritual family.

⁴ I thank my God always when I remember you in my prayers, ⁵ because I hear of your love and of the faith that you have toward the Lord Jesus and for all the saints,

In Thankful Prayers (v.4)

How does Paul think about praying? We notice from his writings that his praying seemed to hover over people. He is thankful for people. He prays "big" prayers for people. His prayers are focused on their spiritual growth. Even when he requests prayers for himself, it is almost always ministry oriented. The more I read the New Testament the more I am convinced, for myself, that my praying is too self-centered and too concerned about physical things. Not that we can't pray for our physical needs – I would commend some really deep thinking about this...

How Paul is honest in his statement? He gives thanks for them *when he remembers them*. This is the practical honesty that we all should emulate. When someone

comes to mind in prayers, we can express our gratitude to the Lord for them. We can have a simple, personal, spiritually oriented prayer for them. I wonder how much richer our lives would be if this were true of us? Would others grow more, mature more, become more stable and wise if we implemented this in our own praying?

What challenges us in our own praying?

Do you pray? Be honest... Do you? It is like reading your Bible... Do you? If you do not read your Bible, then you are not hearing God. If you do not pray, then God is not hearing you.

What do you pray for? What concerns you? When prayer requests are solicited, what immediately leaps to your mind?

And...

In Wonderful Reports (v.5)

Here is what motivates this kind of praying. He hears good reports about Philemon. He is encouraged and motivated to... give thanks.

We don't know if more could or was said about Philemon. This surely is godly and able man. But what moves Paul is not all of Philemon's ministry accomplishments. It is not his position in the church. It is Philemon's love and faith for Christ and for God's people.

So, what impresses you about a brother or sister in Christ? What makes you thankful for them? Do you ever actually express gratitude for your brothers and sisters? Is your poise to notice what bothers you about them? Is it easier for you to grumble about others? Isn't gratitude the antidote for grumbling?

What two attributes has Paul recognized? What is he effectively commending Philemon for? Faith and love. The way it is written is quite odd. Look at it carefully. Love and faith for Christ and for the brethren. It almost seems that it should have been faith in Christ and love for the brethren. Right? Philemon is a man full of faith and love. He has faith in Christ and, surprisingly, in God's people. He has faith for Jesus. He has love for Jesus. So Paul is thankful for Philemon's relationship with the Lord Jesus. This will poise Philemon to be willing to submit to what Jesus requires from him. He will do so because of his faith and love for his Lord.

Philemon also has faith and love for his brothers and sisters. This virtue then will poise him to do what is best for them. This is preparing Philemon for what is going to follow in the letter. He will be asked to do a hard thing and an easy thing because he is poised to believe and love in his Lord. He is also poised to do good for his brothers. What he does not know yet... he has a new brother.

How does this land on you? Do other Christians have confidence in you because you have a reputation for submitting to Jesus' Lordship out of faith and love? Do people know you will do good for others because you believe in and love your fellow Christians?

One of the challenges is that this is not even really the way we think at all. We may need to think about this very deeply...

As a Fruitful Man (6–7)

⁶ and I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective for the full knowledge of every good thing that is in us for the sake of Christ. ⁷ For I have derived much joy and comfort from your love, my brother, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you.

The Request (v.6)

Philemon is a man who shares his faith. I know what we mean by that phrase. But is that what Paul means? Is this prayer for Philemon's evangelistic efforts?

No, it is not. Philemon is sharing his faith with believers. How do we know that? Because of what Paul is expecting, what he is praying for.

What is the request? That what Philemon is doing will be effective in... the salvation of others? No, Paul is praying that what Philemon is doing may become effective in the full knowledge of everything we have in *us* for the sake of Christ. What then is in us? Is this individual or corporate? I wonder if it is both. There is so much God does through His Spirit and His grace in each of us for our own good. But that which the Spirit does in each of us is never merely for our own edification. It is corporate as well.

What Paul is requesting is for the sake of Christ. He is the central aim and trajectory even of all the sharing of faith and growing in love and work the Spirit is doing. Very simple question for us... is everything you do as a Christian for the sake of Christ?

The Reason (v.7)

⁷ For I have derived much joy and comfort from your love, my brother, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you.

Philemon has brought joy and comfort to Paul. How? By the way the Philemon has loved Paul. It has not just been in words. It must have also been in deeds. Talk is easy and important. Doing what love requires is sometimes hard and critical. But the question is, will Philemon continue to bring joy and comfort with the requests that Paul will have?

Philemon has refreshed his fellow Christians. Why say this now? Maybe because he now has a new brother and an unexpected one as well...

Reflect and Respond

When you think of a person, what is your initial reaction? Is it gratitude? Is it criticism? Is it gracious? Are you poised to think well of *that* person?

What kind of person are you among God's people? It seems that Philemon had both character and spiritual abilities that warmed him to people. He seems to have had gifts of mercy and helps. But do we seek to have grace and to give grace to others?

Think about your own personal and public prayer life... Does it square with the priorities and emphasis we see in Jesus' and Paul's praying?

How do we talk to other believers? What dominates our conversations? Do we share what we have learned, believed, grown-in? I am particularly aiming this at our men. Would the prayer of Paul even make sense to us today? "My prayer for _____ is that his sharing of his faith in conversations with Christians will be effective in helping them to really understand all that Jesus is to us, for us, and in us by the Spirit.

May God give us people who are to each and all of us, like Philemon.