

Unchained | Freedom Rising from Confinement

Liberated to Liberate (Gospel Motivation)

Paul's Letter to Philemon

9.17.17

Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, To Philemon our beloved brother and fellow worker,² and to Apphia our sister, and to Archippus our fellow soldier, and to 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, making mention of you in my prayers,⁵ because I hear of your love and of the faith which you have toward the Lord Jesus and toward all the saints;⁶ and I pray that the fellowship of your faith may become effective through the knowledge of every good thing which is in you for Christ's sake.⁷ For I have come to have much joy and comfort in your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you, brother.

⁸ Therefore, though I have enough confidence in Christ to order you to do what is proper,⁹ yet for love's sake I rather appeal to you-- since I am such a person as Paul, the aged, and now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus--¹⁰ I appeal to you for my child Onesimus, whom I have begotten in my imprisonment,¹¹ who formerly was useless to you, but now is useful both to you and to me.¹² I have sent him back to you in person, that is, sending my very heart,¹³ whom I wished to keep with me, so that on your behalf he might minister to me in my imprisonment for the gospel;¹⁴ but without your consent I did not want to do anything, so that your goodness would not be, in effect, by compulsion but of your own free will.¹⁵ For perhaps he was for this reason separated from you for a while, that you would have him back forever,¹⁶ no longer as a slave, but more than a slave, a beloved brother, especially to me, but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord.¹⁷ If then you regard me a partner, accept him as you would me.¹⁸ But if he has wronged you in any way or owes you anything, charge that to my account;¹⁹ I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand, I will repay it (not to mention to you that you owe to me even your own self as well).²⁰ Yes, brother, let me benefit from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in Christ.²¹ Having confidence in your obedience, I write to you, since I know that you will do even more than what I say.²² At the same time also prepare me a lodging, for I hope that through your prayers I will be given to you.

²³ Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, greets you,²⁴ as do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, Luke, my fellow workers.²⁵ The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.

We've been looking at **The Book of Acts** for two summers. It's the history of how Christianity spread in the first generation after the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

The book ends with the Apostle Paul in prison and we don't know how the trial concludes...it's a cliffhanger ... but we DO know that while Paul is chained, the Gospel, the basic message of Christianity is unhindered. That's the very last word in the historian's record – "unhindered". Paul is chained but the message is UNCHAINED, it's unhindered. The Gospel cannot be confined or tamed or neutralized.

Out of that prison cell in Rome, Paul continues to preach; people are converted AND Paul continues to write letters. Four letters from the New Testament were composed (we think!)

during this incarceration – Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians and Philemon (the Prison Epistles). And the great paradox is that OUT of Paul’s confinement comes a wave of liberation...setting people free for centuries!

This **Letter to Philemon** is a kind of case-study from the life of the early Christian Church AND IT works out and applies to an actual case, a real life situation, it APPLIES the ideas you read about in the other letters regarding community or how the Gospel changes relationships.

This is one segment of a larger story...and by adding up the clues/facts we think that a Christian named Philemon who had been converted through the preaching of the Apostle Paul, that man (Philemon, a wealthy man and a slave owner) had a runaway slave and somehow that slave, Onesimus, later, met up with the Apostle Paul and he too became a Christian.

This letter is Paul’s plea to the master (Philemon) to forgive this slave (Onesimus) and receive him not simply as a slave but as a brother... and perhaps even to release (Onesimus) so that he could become a helper to Paul who was in prison.

This very personal letter raises three questions about motivation...how to move people to do the right thing...how to move ourselves. Three questions: **First:** “What’s better: to do the RIGHT THING with a bad attitude or NOT TO DO THE RIGHT THING because you know you have a bad attitude?”

Second, how can you tell if your attitude is bad?

Third, what to do about bad attitudes?

When scholars started to apply literary criticism to the New Testament writings they discovered some pretty amazing things. Even though the Christian Church has always received these writings as the word of God they are also the works of human authors. And one very common literary device these ancient writers used is called the “chiasm”.

A sentence or paragraph or even a whole book is structured so that the beginning of the unit mirrors the end of the unit. It’s symmetrical. And the structure draws the attention of the reader to the middle of the work, like a peak/summit. The start builds to it and the end stems from it. And that central/focal verse is v. 14,

“but without your consent I did not want to do anything, that your goodness should NOT be as it were by compulsion but of your own free will.”

In other words, says Paul, “I only want you to DO what YOU want to do, and if you don’t WANT to do it... if you aren’t “into it” (as we might say) then I don’t want to do it...”

If your heart isn’t IN this...I will not force you...I could ... v.8 “ I have enough confidence in Christ to order you to do what’s proper” i.e. I know that by God’s grace and His calling, I am an

Apostle... I've been given huge authority ("the keys of the Kingdom") "yet for love's sake I rather appeal to you" – not order but appeal!"

WHY? Not because I have no authority, after all, I am Paul, the aged (the experienced!) and a prisoner of Jesus Christ – i.e. I really belong to Jesus Christ ...I know who I am and I'm secure in that...

BUT it's SO important to me that you have the right attitude – that you actually want to do this – that if you are not willing and are not moved by love, I'm not going to pressure you or force you... I will not treat you like a horse or mule (Ps. 32.9) that has to be bridled and spurred and ridden...

It's the center of the book. It's the lesson and the focal point. It all leads to this conclusion, the moral of the story!

How important IS it that we have the right attitude when it comes to obedience and to doing the right thing?... In Paul's mind, it's supreme!

And the Bible is full of teachings and examples of this very lesson. A man wants to be filled with the Holy Spirit like the Apostles...that's good, right? So he offers to pay them for that blessing (wrong attitude) and he is cursed for it. (Acts 8.20) People in the churches of Galatia are striving to be super obedient but... so that they could earn salvation (wrong motivation) and Paul says, "They are cursed!" (Gal. 1.8)

A woman hosts Jesus Christ in her home. She makes it all perfect and so lavish and lovely... and then she gets ticked off that no one's helping her with the serving (wrong attitude) and Jesus Christ calls her on it! (Luke 10. 38ff)

Jesus Christ says, "If you pray and fast and give away your money to the poor" (all really good stuff...right?) but you do it in order to get people to respect you (a self-serving attitude)...then it's all without merit.

AND TO CAP IT ALL... the Apostle Paul says THESE words which look so sweet and charming but on second look are hard words, "And if I give all my possessions to feed the poor, and if I deliver my body to be burned, but do not have love, it profits me nothing". 1 Corinthians 13.3

And we want to ask, "why would anyone give away his possessions or his very life if not because he/she loved God and loved people?" Paul is saying, "There is no action that is intrinsically good but that any behavior can be corrupted by a wrong attitude. Being a person of radical generosity and impeccable integrity...sold out to you convictions and willing to die ...for the cause, for your kids, for your faith ...AND be motivated by selfishness not love.

And when he comes to pleading for this runaway slave...it's the right thing that Onesimus should be forgiven or even set free but Paul will not have the right behavior at the expense of the wrong motivation or attitude. NOT by compulsion (it's the nucleus of the whole letter)...It must be, v.9 "for love's sake" and v. 14 "NOT by compulsion!"

Now, suppose that sparks something in you. Maybe you think, "Really? I thought it was just important to do the right thing. I was always taught that you should obey whether you feel like it or not...get up and go to work ... study hard even if you don't want to (it'll pay off) ...obey your parents even if you don't agree or don't feel like it ...eat your lima beans – they're good for you!...Pay your tithes – Go to church... call home on the weekends...whether you FEEL it or not!"

So what is this strange teaching that has come to our ears? Could I have been doing the right things all these years but for the wrong reasons...the wrong motivations/attitude?... HOW CAN I EVEN KNOW?

Well, how DO you know? Let me suggest a few ways to discern your own attitudes for doing the right thing and HOW TO KNOW IF THE HEART IS WRONG:

#1 – Paul indicates here that mere pressure is inadequate. "NOT as it were by compulsion" and that word simply means pressure: nagging, fear, guilt, peer-pressure, keeping-up-with-the-Joneses, shame and the desire to get some reward for your self (some form of appreciation or recognition).

And the question is: if and when the pressure is withdrawn, WILL you continue to do the right thing? That's a good question to ask yourself. When no one is there to see or if no one will possibly find out about this "good deed", would I still do it?

#2 Am I mindless in what I am doing? In other words, am I doing this thing just...because we've always done it that way? Paul told Philemon in the core verse (v.14) "not without your consent" and that word implies thought and deliberation.

He gives Philemon some rationale and he wants him to make a decision – don't sort of "go with the flow". The Pharisees in Jesus Christ's day were like this...doing things just because it was the tradition.

It's a good thing that we be purposeful and when we are asked "Why do you do that?" and we struggle to answer, it's a signal: may be the right thing but with the wrong attitude. It's a deliberate approach to life.

#3 You need help in discerning your own motives by what people around you are "feeling" from your good deeds. Is there a "bass-note", a kind of vibe emanating from your supposed good deeds?

This is a tricky thing because it can turn into people pleasing and that's one way to get your motives messed up...Paul brings people into this decision with Philemon – he mentions the man's wife and son and their church NOT to shame or pressure him but so that Philemon will see himself as a part of a community, a Body. We need others to help us see ourselves and our motives...it's like seeing your eyes...you can't do it without the help of a mirror...and often people ARE that mirror for us.

In the book *The Four Loves* C.S. Lewis writes about a woman named Mrs. Fidget who died a few months ago. She was the perfect wife and the perfect mother. Her whole identity was found in caring for her kids, her husband and even her pets. Everyone who knew her always said, "She lives for her family."

She always made her family a hot meal (even when they would've preferred sandwiches). She always made their clothes (even when they would rather buy clothes) because "that's what a good mother does" ... She always waited up til they all get in bed (even when it's very, very late... her adult children can count on her meeting them at the door with that look of grateful relief and the bass-note of self-sacrifice). She is living for her family! Even when she takes her 20-year-old daughter to the doctor, she insists on hearing any diagnosis from the doctor first (IN PRIVATE) because "we don't want to upset her."

And because she was living for her family and "working her fingers to the bone"... her family felt compelled to help her... to help her to help them...Not that they really wanted all that help but... they just couldn't stop her. So they were always helping her...sort of enslaved to her... because she was so very busy living for her family.

Since her death... the daughter has purchased quite a few dresses and is taking riding lessons... Even the dog who was never allowed out except on a leash is now a well-known member of the lamp-post Club on their road".

The story ends with these words, "The Vicar says Mrs. Fidget is now at rest. Let us hope she is. What's quite certain is that her family members are." She did the right things but for the wrong reasons. Her family felt it...but they couldn't tell her... because she wouldn't listen.

And that's it: we need to listen. We can go far down the road convinced that we're loving others...can go our whole lives convinced that we mean well, when in fact, other people are being hurt by our "love"; doing the right things NOT for the happiness and welfare of others but just because we need to be needed or compelled by a need to feel good about ourselves or any other of a million wrong reasons.

SO HOW WAS PHILEMON TO BE MOTIVATED AND HOW CAN WE DO THE SAME?

Well, the Letter to the Colossians begins in an almost identical way to this letter. Paul says to both his audiences, "I thank God...praying for you SINCE I heard of your faith in Christ Jesus AND the love you have for all the saints."

It's not just a nice way to start a letter; it's Paul saying, "This is the thing that makes all the difference and when I heard it was in you, I knew that you had the possibility of being motivated in the new way – faith in Jesus Christ is the way that we receive grace AND GRACE ENABLES US TO LOVE WITH NO STRINGS ATTACHED.

When a person starts having faith that Jesus Christ lived and died for me...He obeyed for me and His record of obedience is credited to my account... He has taken this slave and set me free...I WAS a slave but have been reborn a son... in His death Jesus paid for my sins...

Therefore, I don't have to obey out of some slavish desire to get God to like me...He already delights in me as a Father delights in his own child...and if I have God's delight and the applause of heaven...I DON'T NEED THE APPLAUSE OF PEOPLE TO FEEL GOOD ABOUT MYSELF.

This frees me to do things out of a new and unique motive...I am becoming in practice what God has declared me to be...I am in a sense pressing on to my true purpose and the end for which I was created... I can love without the need to be recognized or affirmed or rewarded. Finally, I can love and give with no strings attached.

Now, do we ever really have motives that are 100% free from selfishness and that are only love? Well, I think we all struggle with this to one degree or another.

And when we find ourselves saying, "I am really not doing this thing for the right reason" there are sometimes when we have to say, "Well then, I have to stop doing this right thing...at least for a time"

Mostly though we'll say, "I don't feel like loving...or forgiving...or obeying...or giving... but I know it's the right thing to do...SO as I do it I will repent and believe and simply tell God, 'Father, I am acting like a slave right now (compelled!) but in reality I am a son. Help me walk in the obedience of a son because of what Jesus Christ has done for me. He became a slave so I could obey as a son..."

If we can pray that sincerely, it will change our marriages, our work-week, our school life, our parenting, the way we face pain...and traffic and everything else in our daily routines.