

Text: Philemon 8-16

Title: The Appeal

Truth: Handle awkward situations by appealing to the practical outworking of Christian faith in willing love for others.

Date/Location: Sunday April 17, 2016 at FBC and September 14, 2016 at DBTS

Introduction

We are privileged to have access in the Scripture to a very personal letter, in the opening verses of which the apostle Paul expresses his love and regular prayer for Philemon and his family. He also speaks of his confidence that Philemon has genuine faith in Jesus Christ, and love for his fellow believers in the church that meets in his home—probably the Colossian church.

When we studied this letter last time, we spent some time trying to understand verse 6, which is, by most accounts, the hardest verse in the book to understand. It was difficult for me to get it right in my mind, and thus to express it clearly when I taught on it. After time and reflection, I think I've gotten it a little better.

What we gleaned can be broken into three more verbose statements in which the second builds upon the first, and the third upon the second.

First, Philemon is a participant (partner, sharer) in the Christian faith. The partnership idea puts Philemon's faith in the context of a "community" of believers, with which he shares a solidarity of belief, purpose, world view, and the like.

Second, Paul prayed on *that* basis that Philemon would acknowledge every good thing that he possesses in Christ Jesus. In other theological words, as a follower of Christ, he has a number of good things dwelling in him as a gift of Christ through the indwelling Spirit. These must be known and considered. Paul does not detail them in his prayer report, but we will see some of these good things surface as we study what Paul is going to ask Philemon to do in the letter.

Third and finally, the prayer request is that the foundation of partnership in the faith and the recognition of the good things he has in Christ will become effective in the life of Philemon. The word "effective" indicates that Paul wants Philemon's faith to come to practical expression, to be active.

Now, the situation concerning which Philemon's faith must be active is a very awkward and difficult one. As you know, it has to do with a runaway

slave, Onesimus, who fled his duties and apparently wronged his master in some other way, perhaps by thievery. For the two of them to get back on good terms is going to take some serious forgiveness and reconciliation. Such victories are not always easy to achieve in interpersonal relationships between sinners.

The apostle is going to go to bat for Onesimus and ask Philemon a favor regarding his former slave.

Do you have some very awkward interpersonal situation to deal with? We see an example of the apostle doing that very thing here. Watch how he does it.

I. The Basis of the Appeal: Christian Love, v. 8-9

Christian duty should be motivated by Christian love.

A. Paul could issue a command as an apostle of Christ for Philemon to do what is right. He frequently did so by passing on the Lord's commands (not suggestions) in his writings.

1. Examples: 1 Cor. 14:37; 1 Thess. 4:2; 2 Thess. 3:4, 6, 12. Paul commanded Timothy about his ministry in 1 Timothy 6:11–14. 2 Peter 3:2 refers to commands of the Lord given through the apostles.
2. Someone may raise an objection: "But this is a personal letter, that's different than the Lord commanding something." The rebuttal is that whether Paul is talking to a whole church of Christians or to an individual Christian is not relevant to the fact that as a representative of the Lord, he could tell anyone how to behave as a Christian.
3. But he concedes the right to issue an order in favor of another method, which he gives next.

B. Instead, he prefers to make an appeal as a friend on the basis of Philemon's Christian love. "I'm asking, not telling." Philemon's love for Paul, not to mention the loving compassion he should have toward Onesimus, should motivate him to hear Paul out and act appropriately.

1. Paul adds information about himself to the appeal and thus heightens the sense of compassion that Philemon would have for this elder statesman of the faith. Paul was not 80 at this point, but he probably was senior citizen status, and very aged by the things he had been through (2 Cor. 11:23–28). He was also imprisoned for the sake of the gospel. His jail time was 'sanctified' because it was caused by his ministry for Christ.

2. An appeal is a lot more effective when the person embraces it and does the inner work himself of accepting it, as a blessing to the requestor instead of under compulsion as a servant. It's like the difference between cleaning your room because you want to and want to please your parents, versus doing it because you were commanded to do so after it had reached a certain disastrous state.
3. **Apply:** Your Christian duties should be motivated by love. It is an obligation for Philemon to reconcile with Onesimus, but that cannot really be done out of mere obligation. It has to be done out of love. And this is where Philemon's partnership in the faith needs to come to practical expression. We don't live a theoretical faith! We live a faith that is to act like Christ even in difficult situations.

II. The Beneficiary of the Appeal – Onesimus, v. 10-11

- A. Paul's "Son." Paul is asking on behalf of a person saved under his ministry, who is his spiritual "son." He had been saved under Paul's teaching. How exactly that all happened would be an interesting biographical read, but it is left to our imagination as to how the slave ran away and made it to Rome where Paul was, many hundreds of miles away.

Only after nine and a half verses does the apostle Paul finally identify by name the man of whom he speaks—Onesimus! Perhaps he was standing in front of Philemon at the moment, or perhaps he was "hiding" outside until the letter was read before introducing himself in person.

Apply: Do you have any spiritual children? How many? What are their ages? How are they doing?

- B. The Prior Unprofitability of Onesimus. Prior to this, he did not serve a beneficial purpose. This is a kind way of saying that he was useless or even *worthless*. He was worse than break-even. When you had him for a slave, you lost money. That is true particularly because he had defrauded his master out of some money or goods. It may have been true because he was lazy. Remember, we don't know why he was a slave—maybe he had a debt to work off and was legitimately confined to debt slavery. But it is true even moreso that he was unprofitable because he *left* and offered nothing to his master during the time of his absence.
- C. The Present Profitability of Onesimus. His stock price went up. He holds profitability now for both Paul and Philemon. He is now a useful, helpful, beneficial person. Salvation did something to Onesimus. Among other

things, it made him a better slave, just like it will make you a better worker, husband, and student. Christ makes people useful to God!

III. The Sacrifice and Voluntary Nature of the Appeal, v. 12-14

A. The plainly stated fact of v. 12 is that Paul is sending Onesimus back.

1. This causes the whole “problem” of the letter because you have a slave owner meeting face to face with a slave who ripped him off, a church who saw the whole thing happen (months or years earlier), the issues of forgiveness and reconciliation, the awkwardness of it all, etc.
2. If Paul had just written about it on paper, that would be one thing, but the letter comes along with the offender! That brings the whole thing to life, doesn’t it?! Some masters may have snuffed out their slave’s life right then and there, because of the crime committed. It would be expected that Onesimus would receive some form of (corporal) punishment. Otherwise, if masters did not or were not permitted to punish slaves, and severely so, there would be slaves rising up and revolting all over the empire because there would be no incentive for them to work and behave properly.

B. A Small Difficulty in the Text

1. It seems that some scribes brought forward a copy of “receive” from verse 17 and made it stand here as an imperative. This is something like Ephesians 2:1 where the KJV translators brought forward a copy of “made alive” from verse 5 and duplicated it into verse 1. In that case, there is no question about the Greek text “made alive” is just not there. It was a translator decision. Here I am agreeing with other modern English translations that the same thing may have happened in the scribal copying process for this text.
2. If I am wrong on that analysis, we have to deal with the imperative “you receive him.” In the context of the “appeal,” from verses 9 and 10, the imperative seems jarring. If it is original, then it has to be taken in context like a prayer that you might make to God. You might use a grammatical imperative. “God, save him from his sin!” Or, “God, heal him.” These are commands to God, but really they are requests like this: “God, *please* save him.” And, “God, *please* heal him.” We do not command God. And here, Paul is not really commanding Philemon. He is kindly *asking*.
3. If I am right in agreeing with the modern English versions, then all Paul is saying is that he is sending Onesimus back and that Onesimus has

become very dear to Paul. His relationship is like a father and a son. They grew close over the recent months.

- C. The sacrifice in the appeal is that Paul is losing a valuable co-worker, friend, ally, confidant, helper, etc.
1. Paul wished to keep Onesimus to help him in ministry, as a “replacement Philemon” who would help Paul in his master’s place. Maybe Philemon was a former co-worker with Paul and Paul missed those blessed times of fellowship. Such ministry would be especially valuable as Paul is in chains for the gospel and has significant limitations placed upon his ministry.
 2. Paul seems to have an idea of obligatory service that may rub our sin nature the wrong way, so to speak. He mentions the idea of “what was lacking in your service to me” in Philippians 2:30. What is that about? It is that there are certain obligations that Christians have in supporting Christian work (1 Cor. 9:14). If nothing else, then by financial donations to God’s ministers each and every one of us can participate in the Great Commission.
- D. The voluntary aspect of the appeal has to do with the fact that Paul cannot force someone else to do a good work on his behalf. That would be like stealing the good work!
1. To be good, a work has to be done out of someone’s heart in faith and love for God. It cannot be forced, or else it will by definition not be a good work.
 2. I also believe that Onesimus was under Philemon’s authority, not Paul’s. Paul does not want to step in on that relationship.
 3. Another example of this idea is that pastors are to do their work not under compulsion, but willingly (1 Peter 5:2). So it is with all of us. Attitude is almost everything!

Christian duty has to be motivated not only by love, but also out of a willing (voluntary) spirit. It cannot be forced from the outside.

Paul wished to keep Onesimus for his help, but he knew he could not because he wanted Philemon’s good deed to be totally voluntary without a hint of obligation. But another reason for Paul to send Onesimus back is stated next, namely that God was doing something bigger in all this.

IV. The Big Picture of the Appeal, v. 15-16

Christian duty also should be motivated by what God is doing in a situation, inasmuch as that can be humanly known. Look at what God is doing or has done—and see that you can participate in that marvelous work!

- A. It is easy to lose sight of the forest when you are banging into trees all the time. The "perhaps" of Paul was the evident purpose of God. Although it did not appear clearly at first, it was God's plan that this whole situation would lead to the salvation of Onesimus. Perhaps Philemon had even been praying for his slave's salvation, but didn't expect it to come about this way! God sometimes works in unexpected ways. God is behind Paul's "perhaps."
- B. In summary, a temporary departure led to a great improvement in Onesimus' condition and a permanent connection between master and slave.
- C. Their personal relationship now is not defined *primarily* by a "master-slave" status but by a "brother-brother" status.
 - 1. Paul emphasizes that this slave will be a brother in the flesh and in the Lord. He will not harm Philemon now, he will be a beloved brother. I get the idea from this "in the flesh and in the Lord" that Onesimus is not just a brother "in the Lord" but he will be one "in the flesh."
 - 2. Similarly, we should be real brothers in the Lord: not just theoretically or "spiritually" but also "in the flesh" actually, in "real life."
- D. Does Paul's appeal include removing Onesimus from slavery status? I do not believe it does, because the text says "no longer **as** a slave but more than a slave." This means "no longer **as merely** a slave, but better or above slave status." His "better" status is because He is a Christian now. He probably has some debts to pay to his former master and will need to work those off to be just and right. And he'll gladly do it, too, as a Christian slave.
 - 1. Recall that it was not abnormal in the Roman Empire for slaves to be manumitted. Also recall the point that the NT regulates slaves and masters but does not outright abolish the practice because, among other things, it was secondary to the main purpose of the Christian faith. That purpose is to reconcile men to God and emancipate them from slavery to sin.

2. But the elevation of the slave to brother status in Christianity was the ultimate undoing of slavery in the long run.

E. Does Paul's appeal amount to asking for Onesimus back? No. While it would be a wonderful donation for Philemon to manumit Onesimus and send him back for missionary service, Paul was not asking for that. The request really has to do with personal reconciliation and mercy in place of punishment for the misdeed that he did. Although Paul would like the extra help, a higher priority for him is to reconcile two brothers.

Conclusion

"If you love me, keep my commandments." John 14:15; 1 John 5:2-3. This truth is as old as the books of Moses, as in Exodus 20:6 and Deut. 5:10. Christian duty is Christian duty, but it is properly motivated out of love for God and love for brothers and neighbors; out of a willing spirit; and in light of what God has done in the cross and is doing in people through the cross. What a drudgery to just do things because you have to. What a delight to do things you want to do as a participant in the things God is doing!

In terms of personal relationships, remember that brother-status should trump our other problems, our foibles, idiosyncrasies, tics, and all the rest. Christians are bought with the same blood, share the same Father, are blessed with the same forgiveness, have the same Spirit living in them, and a thousand other commonalities. Let not some little thing come between us.

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