

Nov. 22, 2020

A Postcard from Prison

Part 1

Philemon 1-7

LTS: 1 Peter 1:3-9

The fellowship of brotherly love most powerfully glorifies Christ when it reconciles estranged Christians.

In the year 62 A.D., a crime was committed in a small backwater town in present day Turkey that went by the name of Colossae. The record of the event does not include a description of what was stolen, but it was clearly something its owner deemed valuable.

Pursuing all known leads, investigators on this case were able to trace the thief's movements for 1,000 miles before the trail evaporated in the dense population of the imperial city of Rome.

The crime probably would have remained unsolved and historically unknown forever, except that the invisible hand of God led the young thief to a house where no less than the Apostle Paul lived under house arrest.

While it's not clear how these two lives came together, it has been suggested that the fugitive - lost, hungry and destitute of all necessities – providentially ran into a man from his home town -one Epaphras by name- who was personally acquainted with Paul and led the young man directly to him.

Who was this mystery felon? Well, if you have read your Bible, you already know him. He is the run-away slave, Onesimus.¹

Though Paul was under house arrest at the time, he and Onesimus became dear friends. Through continued fellowship, Onesimus repented and became a Christian, helping Paul in his ministry. But, somewhere along the way, Onesimus must have confessed to Paul his background, his crime against his former master, Philemon, and his flight to freedom. Despite Onesimus's new-found life in Christ, Paul knew his past actions needed resolution. He was now a Christian who had sinned against a brother in Christ. And the teaching of Jesus on the matter couldn't be clearer. In the words of Christ himself (Mat. 5:23).

¹ Adapted from... Knute Larson, *I & II Thessalonians, I & II Timothy, Titus, Philemon*, vol. 9, Holman New Testament Commentary (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2000), 399.

If you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the alter and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.”

You see, friends; there can be no true fellowship between offended believers without reconciliation. And in the mind of God, when fellowship is lost, reconciliation is more important than worship. This, my friends, is the major theme of this letter. And all of it is couched on the beautiful and powerful experience of biblical fellowship.

The message I want you to take away today is this: that...

The fellowship of brotherly love most powerfully glorifies Christ when it reconciles estranged Christians.

But as always, let's begin by reading the text. Please stand with me in honor of God's word as we read the entire letter of Philemon.

Read Philemon:

Before we get into the meat of the text, let me just make a few observations. At the end of our study of Colossians we learned that nearly all the people Paul names as his fellow ministers there are named again in Philemon. That's because the letter to the Colossians was addressed to the very home of Philemon where the church of Colossae gathered.

When Paul wrote this short epistle, he was in Rome under house arrest. That's why (1) he refers to himself a prisoner of Christ. Normally in his letters, Paul identifies himself as an apostle of Christ or slave of Christ. But here he calls himself a Prisoner of Christ.

It is remarkable to note that while Paul may be in the custody of Rome, he is a prisoner of Christ. One fateful day several decades earlier while on the road to Damascus, the Lord Jesus Himself arrested him with the power of sovereign grace.

Next, we should observe that in verse 1, Paul mentions a few significant people. First there's Timothy, Paul's young protégé whom we all know. There's Philemon who was likely a businessman (probably in agriculture) who owned a house and had slaves.

I would remind you that we learned some things about ancient slavery when we were recently studying the book of Colossians, so I will not repeat all of that here. For our purposes, slavery becomes an issue because, as we have already seen, Onesimus was one of Philemon's slaves, and he had run away. (More to come on that as we go).

We should also make mention of those to whom this inspired "Postcard" is addressed. Paul writes, "To Philemon, our beloved fellow worker and Apphia our sister and Archippus our fellow soldier." If you read the literature on this verse, most scholars believe that Apphia is Philemon's wife and Archippus is their son.

Of course, no one knows how old Archippus was at the time. I like to think that he was but a boy – young Archie. More likely, however, he was a young man like Timothy once was who had already been entrusted with significant responsibility. Hence, at the end of Paul's letter to the Colossians he says, "Tell Archippus to fulfill the ministry that you have received from the Lord." And here (2) Paul refers to young Archie as "our fellow soldier."

The final honorable mention is "the church that meets in their house." I love the way Paul says that. The church is NOT the building. The church is the people who meet in that building. It's who we are, and who we love to be.

Now I want to remind you that the central theme of this little epistle is reconciliation.

- One man has sinned.
- One man has been sinned against
- And one man is helping them to reconcile.

The goal Paul has in mind was NOT merely to convince them to "bury the hatchet," as they say, but to transform their relationship completely! Why? Because this is what Christians do. When there is a sinful breach of fellowship, we reconcile with one another because we exist to show the world what God is like, what Christ is like and what the Gospel is like. Paul is adorning the gospel of God in his labor to mediate between the two parties NOT merely so that they can recover the old relationship, but to make that

relationship better than it ever was before! Paul wants Philemon to see Onesimus no longer as a slave, but as a son.

Therefore, after his usual greeting (3) Paul begins to pour over Philemon the...

I. Fellowship of Appreciation:

1. Now, the focus on fellowship may seem arbitrary at this point, but really, it's not. The epicenter of this whole letter is found in verse six where Paul says to Philemon,

...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."

2. The word for sharing there is *Koinonia*, which, as you know, means "Fellowship." This is a precious word for Christians. It refers to how we experience an intimate sharing of one another and a mutual sharing of Christ. There is a deep, rich theology behind the biblical concept of Fellowship. So, we should be careful when we call our Thanksgiving service the "The Pie "fellowship." We don't share spiritual "oneness" with pie (though we may share a kind physical oneness with pie).

3. In the letter to Philemon, the Holy Spirit is calling us to share in a radical kind of fellowship, a radical *Koinonia*. That is, Paul is going to call Philemon to do something unthinkable in 1st Century Asia. He wants Philemon NOT only to put a stay on the usual death penalty for runaways, but to completely forgive and reconcile with him as a brother and son in the Lord for the glory of Jesus. But in verse 4, Paul is just warming up to the subject. He is wisely softening Philemon's heart before he even knows what Paul is going to ask of him. Notice how Paul approaches the subject.

4. The first words Paul speaks are words of deep appreciation. Paul loves this brother. Philemon was born again under Paul's personal ministry. We all know that Paul never shies away from addressing character flaws in his own teammates when necessary. But there's none of that here. Paul holds Philemon in the highest regard.

5. Look at verse 4: Paul says, "I thank my God always when I remember you in my prayers." Philemon must have been a uniquely godly figure in the early church. He isn't

identified as a pastor or a deacon in the church. He was just a godly businessman. A Godly Christian. He's a man of such a quality that Paul says, "Every time I think of you, I thank God." Wow! Can you imagine having a heavy weight like Paul say something like that about you?

- A. You've got to know that Paul could say of many, "Every time I think of you, I ask God to grant repentance; or I pray God will humble you and draw you back to himself.
- B. But of Philemon he says, "Every time I think of You, I thank God." What is Paul doing? He is communicating deep appreciation. It's what I am calling the "Fellowship of appreciation." Paul's words are the fruit of sharing life and ministry with Philemon, who, like Epaphrus, probably heard the gospel at the School of Tyrannus, repented, and immediately got busy advancing the gospel at Paul's side.
- C. By the way, there's an excellent leadership lesson here. Effective leaders express substantive appreciation to those they lead. This is true of pastoring, parenting, marriage, and a thousands other leadership roles. It's just easier to follow someone who spend more time expressing appreciation than disappointment and correction. Paul was an effective leader.

6. But Paul isn't finished with the appreciation. He goes on to say (5), "Because I hear of your love and of the faith that you have toward the Lord Jesus and for all the saints."

- A. Now here is the substance behind Paul's appreciation. The reason Paul appreciates Philemon so much is because even when they are separated by a thousand miles, he keeps hearing reports about Philemon's faith in Christ, and his care for God's people.
- B. Ironically, Paul probably received at least some of these glowing reports from Onesimus, his runaway slave turned brother in Christ. We don't know why Onesimus ran away, but apparently it was NOT provoked by mistreatment on the part of Philemon. This was a man whose signature characteristics were faith toward Christ and love for people.
- C. And by the way, we should be reminded here that true faith will always be accompanied by love. When a sinner receives the gift of faith unto salvation, the fruit of that faith is always love for God and love for people. You begin to love the

Lord our God with all your heart, and our neighbor as yourself. The essential binary of faith and love were evident in Philemon's life. And Paul told him so.

- 1) As a point of application, can I ask you a question? When was the last time you sent a note to someone in the church body just to verbalize substantive appreciation for their evident faith and obvious love.
- 2) This is a great way to lay the relational groundwork for deep fellowship within the body of Christ. This is the Fellowship of Appreciation.

7. Second, we come to the...

II. Fellowship of Sanctification:

1. Let's refresh on the next verse. Verse 6 reads,

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.

2. Now, as I have said, this verse is the epicenter of the whole letter. The problem, however, is that it is also a difficult verse to understand (you have probably already gathered that).

3. Let's take this one step at a time.

A. Paul has just commended Philemon for his faith. Now he prays about the sharing of that faith. But what does Paul mean when he speaks of "sharing" your faith? Many have assumed that he is speaking of evangelism. "Sharing your faith" is often a term we use as a synonym for sharing the gospel. But there is a roadblock to that interpretation in this text; namely, the word "sharing."

B. The word for "sharing" (as I said earlier) is *Koinonia*, usually translated "Fellowship." In our modern culture, "Fellowship" is something we experience when we get together. We view it as kind of a passive thing that comes upon us

when we all like each other, share with each other, and pray together. And that is NOT an illegitimate expression of true fellowship. But in this passage Paul means much more.

- C. The renowned commentator, Douglas Moo points out that Paul is the only New Testament writer who uses *koinōnia* in a theologically significant way.² And here, it is very significant. In this verse, *Koinonia* (fellowship) is offered in an active sense. It is NOT simply experiencing something passively. It is doing something intentionally. And the reason fellowship is doing something is because it is rooted in faith. In other word, one's active trusting of Christ drives us to an active sharing, and active loving of one another.
- D. So Paul is praying that the active participation, or active ministry to others that grows out of your active faith in Jesus will do something. Now what does Paul pray that it will do?
- E. Paul is praying that Philemon's active faith which manifests in active sharing (*Koinonia*) will (6) "Become effective." The term "effective" is the word from which we derive the English word Energy. So Paul is asking God to make Philemon's active sharing (or active generosity) POWERFUL in his life and that church in practical ways.
- F. Then Paul adds the phrase, "Through the knowledge of every good thing which is in you for Christ's sake." The word for knowledge here is not a reference to an accumulation of facts and propositions, but rather a knowledge that can be known only by practical experience.
 - 1) Our family used to do a lot of rock climbing and repelling over cliffs when we were all a little young. And each time we would send someone over edge for the first time I would always explain that the first few steps are going to be scary, but as soon as your body gets lower than the edge of the cliff, you will suddenly feel very secure.

It works that way every time. But you will never Really KNOW what I am

² Douglas J. Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2008), 390.

talking about until you experience it for yourself.

- 2) So Paul is saying that your active sharing and loving (Koinonia) will become powerful as you act on every good thing or every good impulse that is in you because God put it in you for the glory of Jesus when you received the spirit of God.
4. Now the reason I call this the Fellowship of Sanctification is because Paul describes this dynamic as something that is future oriented. It is something that Paul prays will happen when you take the risks necessary to actively love others in practical ways. Paul is asking God for that kind of growth in Philemon's life. That is, he is praying for Philemon's sanctification. So this is the Fellowship of sanctification.
5. And that brings us to the...

III. Fellowship of Edification:

1. In verse 7 Paul writes, "For I have derived much joy and comfort from your love, my brother, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you."
2. When we use the word Edification, we are talking about building someone up. That may come through instruction or it may come through words of encouragement. And that's what we find here. Paul is building up Philemon through words of affirmation and encouragement. He's NOT commanding Philemon to do anything. He is simply rejoicing in the effective ministry he has already done and is doing even now.
3. Paul has confidence that when it comes time to show forgiving, reconciling love to his run-away slave, Onesimus," he will do it because he has a long history of loving and serving others for Jesus' sake.
4. While it may be true that Paul has never visited the church of Colossae, he clearly has a close relationship with Philemon. And it was a wonderful, joyful relationship. This friendship has given Paul much joy and comfort because of his evident love. And it wasn't an exclusive love that he only shared with Paul. No, this brother was known as one whose love for the saints refreshes them.

5. Now, I know this message has been more technical than my usual sermon, but I trust the Lord has spoken to you through his word and has encouraged you to engage in the fellowship of Appreciation, Sanctification and Edification.

Conclusion:

1. Perhaps a final summary will help us solidify these things in our hearts:

If our commentator friend, Douglas Moo, could be here to offer a final word, he would say this.

When people believe in Christ, they become identified with one another in an intimate association, and incur both the benefits and responsibilities of that communion. [The letter to] Philemon is fundamentally all about those responsibilities, as Paul, Onesimus, and Philemon, bound together in faith, are forced by circumstances to think through the radical implications of their koinonia.³

5. Here at Calvary Bible Church all of this is just as necessary now as it was 2,000 years ago. There will be times when one person sins against another in a grievous way, and we will have to decide how to respond. We can respond as the world does and merely cut one another off. Or, we can ask God to use our active faith and the knowledge of our mutual participation in Christ to engage in the difficult and radical act of reconciliation for the glory of Jesus and the exaltation of His gospel.

The fellowship of brotherly love most powerfully glorifies Christ when it reconciles estranged Christians.

³ Douglas J. Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2008), 392.