

The Encourager

By Don Green

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Truth Community Church
4183 Mt. Carmel Tobasco Road
Cincinnati, OH 45255

Website: truthcommunitychurch.org
Online Sermons: www.sermonaudio.com/tcomm

We welcome you once again to our church, whether you're here in the room with us or over the live stream, we're so glad that you're with us. We love God's word here. The reason we exist really is to proclaim God's truth and gather God's people around that, especially in days like what we're living in to rally God's people around God's word and have that come and instruct us and we do that in the context of a local church where people commit themselves to a body and gather together faithfully and are involved in each other's lives in different ways. That's central to the life and the existence of a church is the fact that we come not just individually to see what we can get out of it, what you or I could get out of being in this room in this hour, but we come being mindful of being part of a broader body; that we have responsibilities and opportunities and privileges that go toward one another relationally, and to have relationships that are meaningful and significant, and the concept of love and trust and truth are central to the proper functioning of those kinds of relationships one with another. So we're here not just to be able to see what's in it for me but we come with a mindset that we gather together to advance the common cause of truth and sincerity in relationships with one another, and to seek the spiritual well-being of those that would gather together. We're not islands. We're not isolated. We come not as individuals but we come as a body together, seeking to be part of something that is larger than ourselves.

With that in mind, I would encourage you to turn to the text that we're studying this month, the book of Philemon, the short letter that Paul wrote to a man named Philemon some 2,000 years ago, writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit and writing to deal with a particular situation that had occurred at that time that we introduced last week, and yet being mindful that embedded in this letter are principles that are of timeless value, that have abiding significance for us as Christians and the way that we see our relationships and how we interact with one another. Last time, you could say, that we introduced the people that are in the book of Philemon. We looked at the Apostle Paul and the fact that he was in prison. We considered Philemon who was a man of some means who was a noble Christian man and was a person that was central in the functioning of the church that met at his house. And we also introduced Onesimus who was a fugitive slave who had once belonged to Philemon but had run away and now somehow had met the Apostle Paul in Rome and had been converted to Christ and Paul sends him back because he had things that he needed to make right with his master, Philemon.

So we saw the people in the letter as we met together last time and we drew a parallel that I trust is still kind of ringing in your mind, that Paul was acting as an intercessor for Onesimus. He was interceding with Philemon. Onesimus had wronged Philemon. He had probably stolen from him and had broken the relationship and had wronged him and thieved from him and Philemon as the master of the slave, had a right to punish him for that misconduct. Paul, taking the role of an intercessor, gives this letter and sends Onesimus back to Philemon and on behalf of Onesimus, asks Philemon to receive him favorably and says, "If Onesimus has wronged you in any way, charge that to my account. I'll pay the debt, just receive him back and forgive him so that you can be united together once more," and Paul makes that basis of the plea. We said that there is a picture there of what the Lord Jesus Christ did for us, what the Lord Jesus Christ did for us before a holy God. We were the one who had violated and wronged God the Father. We had broken his law. We had sinned against him. We were unfit for his presence. Worse than that, we were subject and liable to his just punishment and we had nothing that we could say on behalf of ourselves. We had no righteousness of our own with which to approach God.

And what did our Lord Jesus do except to come to earth and to live a life that met all of the demands of God's law, and then he offered that perfect life up on a cross as the payment for our sins. He interceded for us and, as it were, now brings us to God and intercedes for us and says, "Father, I am here and I bring to you my own righteousness and my own shed blood on their behalf. I ask you, Father," as it were, "to receive them based on what I have done." And we are reconciled to God. We have peace, objective peace with God. We have the forgiveness of our sins because Christ came as an intercessor and interceded on our behalf and did for us that which we could not do on our own. We come, as it were...Onesimus, let's put it this way, Onesimus came to Philemon and in essence handed him the letter from Paul and that letter protected Onesimus as it appealed to Philemon's love and the principle that Paul would cover any debt. We come to God, as it were, not to hand him our own righteousness and merit but, as it were, Christ hands his own righteousness to the Father, hands his own shed blood to the Father and says, "Receive them on that basis. Receive them for my sake. Receive them on my account." And the Father being the God of love is happy now that his justice and his holiness have been satisfied; he can receive us and forgive us and we are welcomed into his presence. Why? Because Christ interceded for us out of his love for us. What a wonderful picture of it that it is, and it just kind of illustrates and makes it so plain that we come into the Father's presence, we are reconciled to a holy God based on what someone else did for us because our Lord Jesus Christ interceded for us. There should be a great sense of gratitude that each one of you carry toward Christ for that if you're a Christian. And if you are not a Christian, the kindness, the love of Christ that would do that for sinners, should draw you and draw you into a sense of, "Lord, I want to give myself to you. Do that for me as well. Bring me to God the Father through your righteousness and shed blood."

Well, this week, today what we're going to do is we're going to move on and kind of do a quick survey of the opening section of Philemon's letter. Now that we've got the people

out and introduced, I want to show you from the way that Paul addresses Philemon, the principles, the spiritual principles that underlie this letter, and then in the following week or two, we'll look at exactly everything that Paul says to him. But Paul addresses Philemon out of the overflow of certain spiritual characteristics, certain spiritual attitudes, certain spiritual principles that inform everything that he says in this letter and it all just kind of spills naturally out as he addresses Philemon in this opening section of the letter.

I'm going to read verses 1 through 7 here this morning and I encourage you to follow along with me as we read. Philemon, verse 1,

1 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.

What I want to do this morning is kind of go through this passage really without the outline that I normally would give to you but just to kind of walk through this section of Scripture and then at the end draw out a few simple pieces of application that would help inform and to shape our life together as a body of Christ here in this local church, and just kind of walk through the letter without some artificial structure being put on it and realizing that Philemon would have received this letter and he just would have read these words from the hand of his friend, from the apostle, from his fellow Christian, Paul and so that's what we're going to do here this morning.

Notice how Paul opens the letter. In the custom of letter writing in that day, he identifies himself first. We do it just the opposite. We say who is writing the letter at the very end. In the first century, they did it just opposite which I think actually makes a little bit more sense. "Who is this letter from? Oh, it's from Paul." I see it right off rather than having to read all the way to the end to find out the answer to it. And Paul's opening here is a little bit different than what you'll find if you compare it with other letters that he wrote. In many of his letters, he'll start out by saying, "Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus," and he does that in the other letters to emphasize his authority as he writes; that as he writes to a local church, he is doing so as an authoritative representative of the Lord Jesus Christ whose word must be obeyed, whose word must be followed because he is giving the Lord's instruction to his church and because Jesus Christ is Lord, we are under a responsibility to do what he says to do, to obey, because the church belongs to Christ. It is his by divine purchase and so Paul often writes and opens up his letters appealing to his apostleship as the ground upon which he writes. Do you know what? He doesn't do that

here and the difference is striking and gives you a sense that he is doing something different when he writes this letter.

Notice what he says there in the opening verse, Philemon 1, he says, "Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother." Notice this, beloved: he calls himself a prisoner which in one sense is identifying his present circumstances. He says, "I'm a prisoner of Christ Jesus," by which he means that, "I am in prison by the will and direction of my sovereign Master. I am here suffering. I have lost my liberty out of my faithfulness to the ministry that Christ has given to me." So Paul is sitting in prison writing this letter and yet he writes not as an apostle saying, "I have authority to write here," but he says, he describes himself, his self-description is, "I am writing to you as a prisoner of Christ Jesus." Why does he do that? Why does he make that kind of distinction? He has something that he wants Philemon to do – watch this, this is really important – he has something that he wants Philemon to do, he has a message that Philemon is to give heed to but he doesn't appeal to authority as he does it. He is not writing as one commanding, he is writing as one who is making an appeal.

Look at verse 10 there where you can see this, actually in verse 9 as well. Let's just for fun go to verse 8. I'm kind of working my way backwards there. I want you to see that how Paul describes himself in verse 1 is consistent with the appeal that he makes later in the letter. In verse 8 he says, "Therefore, though I have enough confidence in Christ to order you to do what is proper," he says, "I'm confident of my authority as an apostle. I could tell you what to do but," he says, "that's not what I'm doing here." He says, "Rather for love's sake I am appealing to you," I am treating you, I am speaking to you in deference; I am speaking to you as an equal; I am asking for you for something, not commanded you. It changes the whole nature of the appeal. He goes on in verse 10 and he says, "I appeal to you for my child Onesimus, whom I have begotten in my imprisonment."

So do you see the difference, do you see the tone? Sometimes it's very important to notice these very basic fundamental facts so that you understand the entire spirit in which a letter is being written. This is not an apostle commanding someone to do something, This is a Christian who is suffering saying, "I'm asking you to do something," and you know distinctly, you know intuitively, you know by your own experience the difference that you feel when someone comes and insists that you do something and says, "You must do what I say," versus someone who says, "I'm appealing to who you are and I'm asking you to do something." The spirit of this letter is a request, not a command based on apostolic authority. So here what you see is and what makes this letter a particularly sweet part of Scripture, is you see Paul writing a personal letter to a man that he considers a fellow worker and a friend and says, "I am appealing to you like that. In the context of the body of Christ, I'm writing to you to appeal in love to you."

So picture yourself as Philemon receiving this letter. First of all, it's from Paul. You've got an established relationship with him in the past and Paul says, "I'm writing to you from prison." Immediately your sympathy is going to be out toward him. "He is suffering for the sake of the Gospel that saved my soul. He is suffering for Christ. He's suffering

for my Christ. He's lost his liberty and he's writing to me from prison." Your heart is going to be open and drawn to what he has to say to you just out of a matter of pure human sympathy, out of sympathy for the Gospel. So immediately from the way that Paul frames it, there is this sense of warmth that is created in what is said.

Let's go on. Paul says, "I am a prisoner of Christ Jesus and Timothy our brother," simply indicating that Timothy is with Paul as he wrote this letter; Timothy knew Philemon from prior experience, from prior relationships. They had been together and so Paul is simply acknowledging that Timothy is with him. Note this, Timothy is not a co-author of the letter because as you go into the body of the letter, Paul writes in the first person singular, "I appeal to you. I ask you to do this. Philemon is my child," not "our," not "we," and so the mention of Timothy is simply incidental, a courtesy to the fact that Timothy is with him, a recognition that Philemon and Timothy knew each other, but it's simply an opening courtesy, not an indication that Timothy was joint author with Paul in the letter. Timothy was not an apostle and so he would not be writing in that capacity. He is not on an equal plane with Paul in terms of the basis upon which this appeal is made but he knows Philemon so just as a natural matter of course, you know, as Dane greeted us from Mexico in times past, Paul says, "Timothy joins in the greeting that I'm sending to you."

Now, with that said, look at how he addresses Philemon there at the end of verse 1, "To Philemon our beloved brother and our fellow worker." This is a private letter to Philemon and he's addressing Philemon from a posture, a position of appreciation and affirmation. That's really essential to see. Paul, here it says, "Philemon, I recognize you as a fellow brother in Christ. I recognize, Philemon, that we have worked together on Christ in the past. We have a standing relationship, one of love, one of shared ministry." So again you see the way that he is addressing him is he is addressing him on a horizontal plane of equality saying, "Philemon, my brother, I write to you. Philemon, my fellow worker, I write to you. Philemon, I'm writing to you as a prisoner of Christ Jesus."

So what I want you to see is and this is all going to inform our life in the body going forward, what I want you to see is that the skillful sympathy that Paul cultivates from the very start, he shows respect, he shows deference, he declares his love, he declares his own personal circumstances. There is a whole lot of human warmth and relational attributes going on as we see this letter being opened up before us as we read this. This is a letter between two friends. This is a letter from two fellow Christians, not from, between two fellow Christians that have shared life together and now an issue has come up that needs to be addressed and Paul appeals to the context of their relationship before he moves into what he wants Philemon to do. Here's the thing: as Philemon is reading this and, again, just picture yourself receiving a letter like this from perhaps a spiritual leader that you've respected and worked with in years gone by and he addresses you with that kind of love and warmth and respect, you're going to be inclined toward him. You're going to be receptive to what he has to say. All of that contained just in that simple first verse.

Now as the letter goes on, notice what Paul says here in verse 2. Paul not only has acknowledged that Timothy is with him, he makes an incidental acknowledgment of the

people that are with Philemon. Look at verse 2 with me, he says, "and to Apphia our sister," she was perhaps, perhaps even likely, Philemon's wife, given the order in which she is addressed here; she is a fellow Christian and likely Philemon's wife. Then he goes on and says, "and to Archippus our fellow soldier." Some people think that maybe he was Philemon's son. Others think that maybe he was a leader in the church as well and that he's writing to Philemon but he's appealing also and recognizing that there is a pastoral leader in the midst as well that he should give recognition to. Whatever the case may be, he's simply acknowledging that other people are going to see this letter and he greets them as a courtesy as he writes this private letter to Philemon. Then notice at the end of verse 2, he says, "and to the church that is in your house." We talked about this last time. The believers in that city met in Philemon's house. He gave them the facility, the structure in which they were able to meet together and to honor the Lord and to worship the Lord and to meet for instruction. So there is a group of people around Philemon that Paul incidentally mentions in passing but then he moves on into a private address that he wants to make.

Now, I want to say something here to help kind of give you a sense of what I believe the right way to understand the letter is. There are those and there are some good commentators who say when you see verse 2, what Philemon is doing is that he is invoking those other people, the church and Archippus and Apphia, he invokes these other people as a means of imposing accountability on Philemon to answer in the way that he responds to the letter. So the idea is that Paul has something that he wants Philemon to do and he mentions these other people up front as a way of saying, "Philemon, there are other people who are going to watch how you respond to this and they are going to hold you accountable." The expectation is that the public accountability will help Philemon do the right thing in case he didn't want to do it on his own. What should we say about that? I think it's kind of an important point. I think that's unlikely. I don't think that's right. I don't think that's a proper way of understanding what Paul is doing and the distinction is important for understanding the spirit of the letter. Paul has said as we have already seen in what I've said this morning, especially there in verses 8 through 10, Paul has made it clear, "I am not compelling you, I am not commanding you, I am not asserting my apostolic authority in what I say here. Philemon, we're brothers. I don't need to bear the rod to you. We're brothers. I can talk to you out of a sense of love and I know what you'll do. I know that you'll respond well."

Look at verse 21 of Philemon, he says, "Having confidence in your obedience, I write to you, since I know that you will do even more than what I say." What's he saying? He says, "Philemon, I have confidence that you're going to do the right thing and I appeal to you as I'm writing to you." This may seem incidental but I think it's important: if Paul was going to use these people surrounding Philemon to be an element of compulsion for Philemon to do what he asked to do, it undermines the whole spirit of the letter. If he is going to use those people to pressure Philemon into doing what Paul asks, it makes the whole rest of his letter dishonest. As he's expressing confidence and trust and saying, "Philemon, I know you'll do the right thing so I just need to appeal to you in love," if while he's saying that he's saying, "And you other guys over here, make sure he does it," it conveys the entirely wrong sense of the spirit of the letter. So I think it's better to

simply say Paul knew that other people were going to be there as this letter was received. He acknowledges them. He greets them, but he moves on and talks to Philemon man-to-man. Look, Paul didn't need Apphia, he wasn't hiding behind the skirts of Apphia to get Philemon to do what he wanted. He's talking to Philemon man-to-man. He's talking to him brother-to-brother and you know that because as you go through the rest of the letter, as you go through the body of the letter, Paul says, "I," first-person singular, "talk to you, Philemon," second person singular. That's very clear in the original language. This is one man to another man. So the mention of these people here in verse 2 is merely incidental and a courtesy, not the enforcement mechanism of Paul's letter. If Paul wanted to enforce obedience, he could have done so with his own apostolic authority. So I mention that simply to clarify and to help us see that the spirit of this letter is one of love and trust, and love and trust, the ability to trust one another, is essential to unity in the church. It is imperative that there be trust in the church; that we know that we can have confidence in how one another is addressing us. Well, if Paul was using these other people to manipulate Philemon, then the whole pretext of the letter is lost and so we set that aside and just say Paul, and we follow as Paul deals with his brother in love.

Look at verse 3, he closes his introduction with this traditional greeting that is found often in his letters. Verse 3, "Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." Grace brings peace. God's grace, the grace of Christ, brings peace in two different senses to us as a believer. In a judicial sense, it brings us an objective peace with God in the sense that our sins are forgiven and we do not fear the judicial punishment of God. Why? Because that judicial punishment was fulfilled at the cross. God has punished Christ for our sins, now he looks at us as believers and says, "Your sins and your lawless deeds I will remember no more." That is a gracious act of God toward us and it means that there is peace with God, between us, between you and God, if your faith is in Christ. God brings peace. There is no longer war. There is no longer wrath coming from God toward you as a Christian. Why? Because it has all been settled. There is no reason for anger. There is no reason for judgment any longer because it was fully discharged and dispensed with when Christ drank the cup to the last drop on our behalf. So there is no reason for you to fear the judgment of God as a Christian. Why? Because peace has been brought through the grace of God. You are declared righteous in the presence of a holy God.

Now, along with that vertical alignment, that vertical reconciliation with God, there is the subjective sense of peace. We have this sense of wellness. There is a fullness of spiritual blessing. There is a rest and a calm in our souls that results from knowing that we have been judicially vertically reconciled with God; having that external peace, now we have internal peace that shapes the way that we live our lives. We live from a position of strength. And Paul says as he opens this, he says, "Philemon, grace to you and peace." He says, "Philemon, I want you to walk in the fullness of this grace. I would want you to be utterly saturated with this sense of the gracious purpose of God and to have an experiential knowledge of the outworking of the vertical peace that is yours having been reconciled with God." He says, "I pray that God would give this to you. I pray that our Lord Jesus Christ would communicate this to you. Philemon, as I write to you, I write in a spirit hoping that you'll be enveloped in all of the fullness of the spiritual blessings of

God." That's a pretty lofty way to enter into the letter. So Paul writes wishing the fullness of spiritual blessing on Philemon just as an introductory matter.

So step back for a moment and what do you see in that? You see the godly, loving, warm disposition from which Paul writes to Philemon. There is this overflow of wishing the goodness of God on Philemon that informs the entire spirit of his letter. Everything flows out of that. That's why I don't believe at all for a moment that this could be Paul trying to manipulate others to get Philemon to do what he wants. That's not how he writes to him. It's not the spirit of it.

Now, Paul having dealt with that opening three verses of the general well-wishing of God's grace and blessings upon Philemon, notice how he goes into it and pay particular attention to these next four verses as we go. Paul opens up and he says, "I thank my God always, making mention of you in my prayers." What is he saying there except that, "Philemon, it is my pattern before God to pray for you. Philemon, it is my pattern to thank God for you. Every time I remember you in prayer, I'm thanking God for you. Why? Because of who you are; because of what God has done in your life. I thank God that you are who you are and I thank God that he has done the work that he has done in your life. You are an ongoing part of my prayer life, Philemon," he says.

Then he gives the grounds of his thanksgiving, why it is that he's thankful. Look at verse 5 there, he says, "I thank my God always because I hear of your love and of the faith which you have toward the Lord Jesus." He expands and you just see the overflowing depth of the heart that Paul draws upon as he's interacting here. He's not superficially saying, "Philemon, I pray for you." He takes the time to unfold it in a way that is designed to edify and encourage Philemon. He says, "I'm thanking God for you and let me tell you why I thank God for you, it's because I've heard of what you're like in my absence. You show love to all the saints." The beginning phrase here, "your love," goes with the last phrase of the verse, "I hear of your love toward all the saints," it's kind of an X pattern where the first thing that he states goes with the last thing that he states and then there's something in the middle there. "I hear of your love. Philemon, the testimony, the reports that come back of the way that you care for the saints gives me ground to thank God. I'm so grateful to have a godly man like you living out ministry the way that you do"; he says, "I hear of the faith which you have toward the Lord Jesus." It's not simply that Philemon was a philanthropist. It's not simply that he was charitable with others on a horizontal level. He says, "Philemon, I know, I hear that the way you walk is reflective of a true faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and I thank God for that. You love the saints and you show real faith in Christ."

You know, when I think about the people that make up the essence of Truth Community Church, that's how I pray. I thank God for you. Why? Because I see you manifesting love toward the saints. Why? Because I see the reality of true faith coming out of your lives. I see you making decisions that are in one sense against your earthly self-interest but you're doing it out of obedience to Christ. I see you testifying of Christ. I see you bearing witness to him in the things that you say and the way that you live. And what can I do as a pastor except to say, "O God, thank you for that. Thank you that you have brought into

this church people like that." So I can understand the spirit in which Paul writes to Philemon and says, "Philemon, I thank God for you when I pray for you. Here's why I thank God for you, it's because of who you are."

And then Paul goes on and gives Philemon the grounds of his intercession. He tells him, he says, "Here's why I thank God for you, it's because of your love and your faith in Christ," and then he goes on and says, "now let me tell you how I pray for you and specifically what I ask God to do in your life," as he says there in verse 6. He says, "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." He's saying, "Philemon, I am asking God that the external aspects of your ministry, your human relationships, the generosity and love that you show to the saints on an external way would be energized by a true faith and a true knowledge of Christ; that there would be a spiritual component of lasting impact to what you do. As the power of God, as the power of the Spirit of God is at work silently in the midst of what you do, I'm praying that eternal fruit would come out of that." The vastness of Paul's heart when he prays is stunning. The spiritual motivations that inform everything that he says and the way that he prays is remarkable to study and to see played out. And remember, again, I think it's helpful to picture yourself getting a personal letter like this from a spiritual leader that you've respected and worked with in the past and to have that, to get a letter in his own hand that says, "This is what I think of you. You're my brother. You're my fellow worker. I thank God for you. I see the faith that you have in Christ. I see the love that you have. And not only that, Philemon, I want you to know how I pray for you, I pray that all of that would be so energized by the truth that is in Christ, the truth of the spirit, that it would just multiply in exponential effect that would echo throughout all of eternity."

You see, we step back and look at that and say this is where the heart of spiritual life lies. It's not in just external conduct, it's not just in gathering together in an outward manner, beloved, this is what the demeanor and the attitude is toward true Christians toward one another. This is the way that we think about each other. This is the way that we pray for each other. This is what animates life. Not manipulation. Not using people to advance what you want. The spirit of that is a threat to the church and so we repent of that when we see it in our hearts. We repent of that when we see it in the attitudes. We say, "That can't pollute the purity of what is supposed to mark the reality of relationships in the body of Christ." Sincere appreciation, overflowing affirmation, trust and love, that marks the true body of Christ. That's what true Christians do with one another, and it's not simply saying this is the external thing that you do, this is what informs and shapes the entirety of the way that you view each other in Christ. It is a high and lofty and noble character that the Spirit of God works out in those that he saves. This is the way that we think about each other. This is the way that we pray for each other. This is the way that we interact with one another, and Paul is able to say all of these things and to write all of these things to Philemon, why? Because it was already true. He is not making this up.

And what happens when you live that way? What's the impact that that has on each other? Look at what Paul says here in verse 7 as he's reflecting on Philemon and affirming him in all that Philemon has done, he says, "Philemon, I have come to have

much joy and comfort in your love." "Philemon, you have brought joy to my heart. You have been a comfort to my heart. You have encouraged me when I have been down. You have given me joy when I have been discouraged. You have brightened my life, Philemon, by the kind of person that you are." You see, that's what true godly living, that's the impact that it has on one another. That's what we do. That's the impact that we have on each other. Paul goes on to say, look at it there at the end of verse 7, he says, "the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you, brother." "Your life is a cool drink of water in a hot arid land to the people who know you. Philemon, of course I thank God for you. Philemon, of course my love and gratitude go in your direction."

So what has Paul done here in this section that we've admittedly gone through pretty quickly and briefly? What has Paul done? Notice his sequence, he has encouraged him with love. He has affirmed him in sincerity long before he ever gets to the request that he wants him to make. Now, I realize that as we go through life with each other, it's kind of easy sometimes and I guard my heart against this as much as I can, you've got something that you need somebody to do and it's easy to just go, "Hey, can you do this?" Paul doesn't treat Philemon that way. He steps back and before he gets to the request he says, "Philemon, let me tell you about the love that's in my heart toward you. Let me tell you what I see about your character. I love you. I affirm you. Everything about you is a blessing and a refreshment to my heart and to the people who know you." And only from that perspective, only after that context has been clearly established does he step in there in verse 8 and say, "Therefore, I appeal to you for what I'm about to say."

So you see the whole context here. What we see in these first seven verses are not a passing matter of indifference, this is a reflection of what Paul's Christian character looked like. This shows us, this illustrates for us how the Apostle Paul viewed people and thought about them, not as a pope, not as somebody who got to wear the pointy white hat and boss people around. No, Paul speaks to him as an equal, speaks to him in warmth and in love and out of that comes the matter that needs to be addressed, and all of that seen there in the first seven verses of the letter.

What could you and I draw out from this about life in the church and the way that we interact with one another as true believers in Christ? Well, I want to bounce to a couple of different places just as we get a little bit of application to what we've said here. Go back to 1 John, if you will, 1 John 4:7. It's a familiar verse. There's a chorus that sometimes people sing based on the words of this verse. "Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God." There is a spirit of love that animates the life in the church. There is a spirit of love that animates our relationships with one another. That is the spirit in which we interact. That is the overarching principle that animates life in the true body of Christ is the spirit of love, not simply a mechanical operation. You know, some of you have told me in the past you used to go to churches where as soon as the final amen was said, there was a rush to the doors and everybody is trying to get out, you know, and people couldn't wait; they were falling over each other to get out and get elsewhere with their day. We don't seem to have that issue at Truth Community Church which is great but, you see, you know intuitively that something's wrong when it's like that. Well, what's missing is that that communicates a

lack of concern, a lack of interest, a lack of mutual love for one another if the idea is let's just get out as quickly as we possibly can. The spirit of Christian relationships is different.

So what can this passage from Philemon show us? What are some really simple basic things that we can see about church life that we could take out of this? I'm going to give you just three. We're going to be done a little early this morning and that's okay, although I know that people will ask me if I'm actually feeling okay given the fact that I didn't preach for 70 minutes. I feel just fine, thank you.

First of all, in the most simple basic ways, these things are so basic and yet they test our hearts in the way that we think about each other. What can this show us about church life, the way that he has treated Philemon? What can we draw from that in the way that we interact with each other in the context of the body of Christ? First point here is: to thank God for each other. To thank God for each other. Not simply to put on a show with one another and say nice things to each other but that as you go into the presence of God, that you would be mindful of the people that are part of the church that you have given yourself to and thank God for them. Do you know what? God brings godly people to a local body as a gift to the entire body. You all who are godly, you all who are a part of Truth Community Church, you are a gift of God to this church. It's only appropriate that we see each other from that perspective. Whether it's young or old, whether it's a new Christian just heading into the waters of baptism, or whether it's somebody that has been a Christian for 50 years and serving in church leadership, at every strata that you could think about, every matrix that you could apply to it, we look at each other from a perspective that says, "The hand of God has brought someone like that to our church. A true Christian, a loving unifying force in the body, O God, thank you for someone like that. Thank you for someone who can help us understand the truth of God in private conversations, that can encourage young people in their faith as they interact with them privately. O God, thank you that you brought people like that to our church." You see, we see the spiritual contribution that people make and we look beyond that, we look through the window, as it were, and say, "Oh, that's the hand of God to bring someone like that. God, thank you for him, her, her, him, and on it goes." If I started to name actual names here, then I'd have to say all 200 or so and that's just not the point.

Look over at 1 Thessalonians. I'm going to cross-reference to a couple of passages in 1 Thessalonians on these things just to reinforce it. Thank God for each other. Beloved, view each other from a perspective, a disposition of gratitude, the weak Christians and the strong Christians alike, because God has saved them all. Look at 1 Thessalonians, not 2 Thessalonians but 1 Thessalonians 1 and you see how Paul writes to them. He says in verse 1, "To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace." The same basic opening that he gave to Philemon. And what does Paul say to that body? He says, "We give thanks to God always for all of you, making mention of you in our prayers; constantly bearing in mind your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ in the presence of our God and Father." Why are you thankful to God that they're like that? "Knowing, brethren beloved by God, His choice of you." You see, when it comes to true Christians and the

way that we think about each other in the body of Christ, we need to be mindful that the people that God has placed here, those that are true believers, are people that God chose for himself, that Christ redeemed for himself. There is a sense where we handle each other with care, with a spirit of concern and love for one another that looks out for each other's best interests. We're thankful to God that he has given us people like this to share a local body together with. We're thankful because of the faith and the love and the hope that manifest out of each life. We are grateful for that. And because we know that people are like that because Christ saved them and that means that God chose them before the foundation of the world, there is this sense of concern on a horizontal level and of gratitude on a vertical level that says this is really special; to have somebody that God has done a work like that in their lives means that we protect them and we love them and we pray for them and we show gratitude toward them. You see, that's the fundamental way that we view each other in the body of Christ is with that spirit of gratitude.

Secondly, we pray for each other. You thank God for each other, you pray for each other. I know, I know, this is like pre-Christianity 101. If Christianity 101 is basic, this is before basic and yet sometimes even the basics need to be said, don't they, because we realize that we fall short, we realize that we get self-centered in our approach. I know what it's like, you know, that you just kind of get wrapped up in your own circumstances in prayer. "God, help me with this problem. God, sustain me through this." And it all just becomes about me when I'm alone with God. What I want you to see is that God intends us to grow beyond that, to see beyond that, to think beyond ourselves and to see the broader body of Christ. As you go to God in prayer, beloved, bring each other with you as you go in the privacy of your prayer closet, in the privacy of how you pray. You see, God did not give prayer to you simply so that you could manage your own spiritual life and have your own sense of spiritual well-being and have God shave off the hard edges of the circumstances of your own life. That's not why we pray. You see, Paul prayed for Philemon in very clear and specific ways.

Now, you're still in the 1 Thessalonians, at least you should be, look at chapter 3. You see that this is characteristic of the way that Paul prayed and thought of those that were under his care. 1 Thessalonians 3:11-13 just illustrating this concept of "pray for one another." Look at what Paul does in verse 11, he says, "Now may our God and Father Himself and Jesus our Lord direct our way to you; and may the Lord cause you to increase and abound in love for one another, and for all people, just as we also do for you; so that He may establish your hearts without blame in holiness before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all His saints." He says, "Here's how I'm praying for you, I'm praying that God would establish you in holiness and that you would abound in hope until Christ returns for us and brings us home." You see, there's this sense of being aware of the body of believers that you're associated with and as you go to prayer, you, as it were, carry them in on your heart with you and you intercede before God and say, "O God, bless them too, not just me," to kind of purge the natural selfishness that we have. You know, when the high priest went into the Holy of Holies, he had on his breastplate the 12 names of the tribes of Israel indicating that he was carrying on his heart with them; as he interceded for them, he was bringing the whole people of God before him as he went. Well, what we see here is that this is what we should aspire after in prayer as well,

not just ourselves but to be praying for each other as we go. "Father, when I come into your presence, I'm bringing others with me," so to speak. "Father, you won't simply hear me naming intercession for myself," you say to yourself, you resolve in your heart, "No, Father, you'll find me being one who intercedes for the people of God as well."

Finally, thirdly. We said you thank God for each other; you pray for each other; thirdly, you encourage each other. You encourage each other. Paul verbalized his appreciation for Philemon in what we saw. He repeated that and even commanded it in 1 Thessalonians 5. Look at 1 Thessalonians 5:12. Again, we're just kind of looking at a couple of parallel passages to bring the point out for one another. 1 Thessalonians 5:12. I want to be very clear on why I'm pointing this out to you in just a moment. 1 Thessalonians 5:12 says, "But we request of you, brethren, that you appreciate those who diligently labor among you, and have charge over you in the Lord and give you instruction, and that you esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Live in peace with one another." Paul brings out this point of mutual appreciation. He says, "I want you to encourage, I want you to affirm, I want you to appreciate and esteem those who are laboring in your midst; that you would be an instrument of encouragement to one another."

Now, let me say something very clear and distinctly so you know what I'm saying and what I'm not saying. I'm not saying this because I need any more encouragement. I don't. I get far more encouragement and affirmation from you than I deserve and this is not why I point this out. It has nothing to do with that. I'll walk out of here just fine if no one says anything to me on the way out. That's not my point. My point is that this is a mindset in the way that we deal with each other in the body of Christ, where we are speaking to one another saying, "Thank you for what you do. I appreciate it. I affirm you. I see your spiritual strengths. I'm grateful for all that you do." And what I would say on behalf of the others that are on our elder board, for Dan, for Dane, for Andrew, to encourage you to reach out to them specifically like that, those who have an added level of responsibility. They as lay elders carry a weight of responsibility and deal with issues that you never see and it's not always easy. And not only that, they have to interact with me, God bless them and help them. And in the midst of that and I know that many of you are good to do this, I just want to encourage you and ask you to excel still more, in the midst of that, single those men out and affirm them even as you're affirming each other and tell them that you appreciate what they do. That is the Christian way to operate in the sphere of God's people. We don't hold these things back. We don't wait until their funeral and then say them when they are not there to hear it. We express it and thus show our appreciation.

So what does love in the body of Christ look like as we've seen Paul illustrate it in the way that he dealt with Philemon? Grateful attitudes. Prayerful intercession. Sincere appreciation for one another. Wouldn't it be great to be part of a church that loved each other like that? To walk in, in a sense of step out of the wicked world and into a realm where that is what predominates and marks the life of the body? I'm grateful that we are like that. I'm grateful that we're moving in that direction. Keep doing what you're doing and excel still more.

Let's bow together in prayer.

Father, we do want to thank you for our Lord Jesus Christ who loved us first like this, who sought out our well-being, who prayed for us, who now intercedes for us, who sent the Holy Spirit to be an ongoing indwelling encouragement to us. We see that you have abounded and abundantly provided for us in these very areas, Father. As we go to your word, as we go to Christ, Father, we find our encouragement, our strength, because that is how you have dealt with us in a vertical way. Now, O God, I pray that you would help us deal with each other in that way; that that spirit of gratitude, that spirit of prayerful intercession, that consistent encouragement that marks life over a period of time, would be that which marks us individually and marks us as a body of believers at Truth Community Church. Give us grace to that end, Father. May we be diligent to be like that and to cultivate it and deepen it as we go. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

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