

PHILEMON 1 – PAUL’S MASTERPIECE OF DIPLOMACY



Here we have an amazing letter from Paul to a Church member, probably in Colossae. Its principles remind one of the book of Proverbs being put into action. It shows how we should act towards other fellow Christians when difficulties arise. One of the biggest problems in the Church, then, as today, is the lack of tact and diplomacy in our personal relationships with others.

The Epistle of Philemon is thought to be written from Rome around the years A.D. 58-60, while Paul was still in his first imprisonment there. It is addressed to Philemon, a church member which tradition says lived in the Lycus valley in what is now western Turkey, where the cities of Colossae and Laodicea were located.

The situation is as follows: After Paul visited the Lycus valley and established churches in Colossae and Laodicea, Philemon, a prominent man, had been converted to the faith. He had at that time at least one slave, Onesimus, who probably had witnessed his master's conversion. Later, when Paul was imprisoned, likely in Rome, Onesimus, who had run away from Philemon, made his way there and eventually sought out Paul and was converted. He became such a help to him that Paul sent a letter to Philemon asking him to forgive Onesimus and to treat him well so he could perhaps be used by Paul in the future. It is a masterpiece of Christian diplomacy, which we do well to apply its principles in our lives.

He begins, "Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, To Philemon our beloved friend and fellow laborer, to the beloved Apphia, Archippus our fellow soldier, and to the church in your house: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ" (Phil. 1:1-3).

Paul is writing about a delicate issue—an escaped slave had been converted and Paul is sending him back to his master to receive forgiveness. So Paul refers to himself, not as an "apostle" but rather as a "prisoner" of Christ. He also mentions he was in prison, not for any personal wrongdoing but because of preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ. This situation, of course, would touch Philemon deeply, for Paul was his spiritual teacher—so Paul is in effect asking, how can you not favorably consider my request?

He then greets two more of Philemon's household that are converted, apparently his wife Apphia, and Archippus, who is most likely Philemon's son and a leader of the congregation meeting in his home. He is also mentioned in Col. 4:17, "And say to Archippus, 'Take heed to the ministry which you have received in the Lord, that you may fulfill it.'" This mention of Archippus in the letter to the Colossians gives credence that Philemon lived in Colossae and not anywhere else.

He also sends greetings to "the church in your house." Here we have an example of brethren meeting, not in some public place, but in a member's home. It was quite convenient since it would not readily arouse the suspicions of the Roman authorities, who were very wary of public assemblies where conspiracies could be hatched against the Roman government. This gathering also shows Philemon was a wealthy member, who owned at least one slave and had enough space to have church services in his own home.

He adds, "I thank my God, making mention of you always in my prayers, hearing of your love and faith which you have toward the Lord Jesus and toward all the saints, that the sharing of your faith may become effective by the acknowledgment of every good thing which is in you in Christ Jesus. For we have great joy and consolation in your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed by you, brother" (4-7).

Paul is always generous in praise to those that deserve it, and Philemon was an outstanding leader in the Church, opening his home to the brethren and providing for their needs, so he thanks him for this practical outflowing of his love which "refreshed" the brethren when they met.

In this regard, we find here that mysterious word in the New Testament – *koinonia* in Gk., which means *a special godly fellowship and sharing with brethren and God through the Holy Spirit*. John understands the concept, for he says, "...our fellowship (*koinonia*) is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ" (1 Jn. 1:3). In Eph. 3:9 it is called "the *fellowship* of the mystery." So he commends Philemon for having this special sharing (*koinonia*) or active bond of faith with other brethren, which is highly regarded by God.

He goes on to say, “Therefore, though I might be very bold in Christ to command you what is fitting, yet for love's sake I rather appeal to you—being such a one as Paul, the aged, and now also a prisoner of Jesus Christ—I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, whom I have begotten while in my chains, who once was unprofitable to you, but now is profitable to you and to me” (Phil. 1:8-11).

Paul now comes to the gist of the letter, which he had been carefully preparing to ask this favor. He tells Philemon, although he was his pastor, he did not want to use his authority to give him an order, but rather, as a fellow brother in the faith, to appeal to Philemon's converted attitude. He then reminds him of his difficult circumstances, as an aged man, probably close to sixty years old, and his suffering in jail. Notice he brings up Onesimus' name at the very end – again, delicately setting the scene before introducing the main player.

It is apparent Philemon was not aware that his runaway slave was now converted and helping Paul. It would be a shock to him, thus explaining why Paul was so diplomatic about the request. He recounts how Onesimus had come to him and had been converted to the faith. He then uses a play on words, for Onesimus means “useful” in Greek, and while he had become “useless” to Philemon, he was now “useful” to Paul. Here is another instance of good humor in the Bible. It probably made Philemon chuckle when he read Paul's clever and humorous use of those words.

Now, it is important to remember that in the Roman world, about the lowest class possible was that of a runaway slave. He had absolutely no rights and was considered a criminal. The Roman Empire did not tolerate disobedience, especially from slaves, and slavery was a crucial element of its economic wellbeing. It is estimated that at that time around one-third of the population of the Roman Empire were slaves.

Paul further says, “I am sending him back. You therefore receive him, that is, my own heart, whom I wished to keep with me, that on your behalf he might minister to me in my chains for the gospel. But without your consent I wanted to do nothing, that your good deed might not be by compulsion, as it were, but voluntary. For perhaps he departed for a while for this purpose, that you

might receive him forever, 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. If then you count me as a partner, receive him as you would me” (Phil. 1:12-17).

He tells Philemon he is sending Onesimus back so he can be forgiven and be put to good use. Here we see Paul is respectful of the laws of the Roman Empire as long as they do not violate the biblical laws. He did not want to keep Onesimus with him and be breaking the law. As Paul said in another epistle, “Let all things be done decently and in order” (1 Cor. 14:40). Yet, Paul wants to make sure Onesimus will now be treated more as a Church member than a slave, and so he emphasizes that Onesimus departure was like tearing a piece of his heart—for to Paul, he was now no ordinary slave but a fellow Christian laborer.

Paul reminds him that by unforeseen circumstances, Onesimus, Philemon's slave, had ended up serving Paul, and he hints that if Philemon would have known of Paul's need, he would have gladly sent Onesimus to minister to him. Yet, he doesn't want to obligate Philemon to pardon Onesimus, but to do so voluntarily and in good faith. Paul uses the biblical principle that “all things work for good to those that love God” (Rom. 8:28), and suggests that all of this might have occurred so both Philemon and Onesimus could have an eternal brotherly bond. He again uses a cognate of *koinonia*, (*koinonos*) to remind Philemon that he is a “spiritual partner” of Paul, of God and now of Onesimus.

So we see him elevating a slave to a spiritual equality with his master – something that would eventually break up slavery in the Christian world.

John MacArthur in his article, “The Apostle Paul and Slavery” brings this out, “Christianity...sowed the seeds of the destruction of slavery. It would be destroyed not by social upheaval, but by changed hearts. The book of Philemon illustrates that principle. Paul does not order Philemon to free Onesimus, or teach that slavery is evil. But by ordering Philemon to treat Onesimus as a brother (Phil. 16; cf. Eph. 6:9; Col. 4:1), Paul eliminated the abuses of slavery. Marvin Vincent comments, ‘The principles of the gospel not only curtailed

[slavery's] abuses, but destroyed the thing itself; for it could not exist without its abuses. To destroy its abuses was to destroy it" (Vincent, *Philemon*, p. 167). 'One writer summed up the importance of Philemon in relation to slavery in these words: "The Epistle brings into vivid focus the whole problem of slavery in the Christian Church. There is no thought of denunciation even in principle. The apostle deals with the situation as it then exists. He takes it for granted that Philemon has a claim of ownership on Onesimus and leaves the position unchallenged. Yet in one significant phrase Paul transforms the character of the master-slave relationship. Onesimus is returning no longer as a slave but as a brother beloved (vs. 16). It is clearly incongruous for a Christian master to 'own' a brother in Christ in the contemporary sense of the word, and although the existing order of society could not be immediately changed by Christianity without a political revolution (which was clearly contrary to Christian principles), the Christian master-slave relationship was so transformed from within that it was bound to lead ultimately to the abolition of the system" (Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, p. 640).

So, in this small epistle, the seed is planted for the destruction of slavery wherever God's Word prevails. He applies the principle in Gal. 3:27-29, "For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither *slave nor free*, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise."

Paul continues, "But if he has wronged you or owes anything, put that on my account. I, Paul, am writing with my own hand. I will repay—not to mention to you that you owe me even your own self besides. Yes, brother, let me have joy from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in the Lord. Having confidence in your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say" (Phil 1:18-21).

Paul, ever the diplomat, tells Philemon he is willing to pay him whatever Onesimus took from him. Runaway slaves normally robbed money and valuables so they could eat and travel until they

could find a job. Paul is saying he is willing to go this far to appeal to Philemon's good graces.

He also uses a term which aptly illustrates what he mentions in Colossians about the "handwriting of requirements that was against us" (Col. 2:14). It is evidence that it means *our debts to God because of our sins* and not having to do with God's laws, as traditional Christianity commonly has us believe.

Barclay has a good comment on this point, "Onesimus must have stolen from Philemon, as well as run away from him. If he had not helped himself to Philemon's money, it is difficult to see how he could ever have covered the long road to Rome. Paul writes with his own hand that he will be responsible and will repay in full. It is interesting to note that this is an exact instance of a *cheirographon*, the kind of acknowledgment met in Col 2:14. This is a handwriting against Paul, an obligation voluntarily accepted and signed."

Paul ends the epistle, "But, meanwhile, also prepare a guest room for me, for I trust that through your prayers I shall be granted to you. Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, greets you, as do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, Luke, my fellow laborers. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Amen" (Phil. 1:22-25).

He ends the letter with a diplomatic touch—encouraging Philemon to prepare a place in his home when Paul is released—a great honor. He assumes all will be well and that Onesimus has been forgiven when he comes. This ending and the persons mentioned are very similar to the ones in Colossians and thus show Colossae is the most likely place where this epistle was addressed.

The Epistle of Philemon is a masterful example of how ministers should deal with the brethren, and also how brethren should deal with each other, as Paul said in another place, "We're not in charge of how you live out the faith, looking over your shoulders, suspiciously critical. We're partners, working alongside you, joyfully expectant. I know that you stand by your own faith, not by ours" (2 Cor. 1:24, MSG).

In the Old Testament, we have the book of Proverbs as instructions on being diplomatic, and in the New Testament, we have a living example of these principles in this great Epistle of Philemon.