

Philemon

Written by K B Napier
Saturday, 13 March 2010 15:37

How easily we forget what we owe to Christ! We might sail through life quite well balanced until something happens to rock our boat of trust and confidence in others. Then, instead of looking with sadness upon the saved wrongdoer, our hurt turns to resentfulness, and we forget that both of us are equally valued by Christ.

It is very easy to let go of our faith and brotherly love when we are wronged. This ought not to be. Yes, we can be hurt and perhaps damaged by what another does. But, if that person then repents, we must overcome how we feel and show regard for the one who wronged us or others. If he or she has repented, it is our love to do so. Not a duty, but a love. We should be glad to see a fellow believer repenting and returning to the fold, not be resentful and glowering! If we can remove the coals of perdition from his back, then we are commended by God for doing so. We should not display resentment when God has forgiven someone!

Let this very short letter by Paul serve as a lesson in humility. We can all be severely hurt by the sins of another, but we can also be joyful when a sinner returns to Christ and to the brethren. Let us look out for each other and not be punitive.

Verses 1-3

1.

Paul, a prisoner of Jesus Christ, and Timothy our brother, unto Philemon our dearly beloved, and fellowlabourer,

2.

And to our beloved Apphia, and Archippus our fellowsoldier, and to the church in thy house:

3.

Grace to you, and peace, from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Paul, a prisoner and now quite elderly, is writing from Rome, as we see from verse 9. He is intervening on the part of a runaway slave, Onesimus, and petitioning his master, Philemon,

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who is thought to be a pastor/bishop of the church at Colosse, and someone of substance.

Paul wrote the letter himself, not through a scribe, and sends his regards, and those of Timothy. Paul greets Philemon ('one who kisses') of Colosse as a fellow minister. He also sends his regards to Apphia, and we see yet another word for 'love' – beloved, or agapētos, meaning in this text to be worthy of love, or highly esteemed. Apphia ('fruitful') was a member of Philemon's household. Archippus ('master of the horse') was a local Christian teacher. We see that Philemon's household was Christian, as the phrase "church in thy house" signifies.

Paul sends blessings and peace to the whole household from himself, as from God and Jesus Christ.

Verses 4-9

1.

I thank my God, making mention of thee always in my prayers,

2.

Hearing of thy love and faith, which thou hast toward the Lord Jesus, and toward all saints;

3.

That the communication of thy faith may become effectual by the acknowledging of every good thing which is in you in Christ Jesus.

4.

For we have great joy and consolation in thy love, because the bowels of the saints are refreshed by thee, brother.

5.

Wherefore, though I might be much bold in Christ to enjoin thee that which is convenient,

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Yet for love's sake I rather beseech thee, being such an one as Paul the aged, and now also a prisoner of Jesus Christ.

Paul now thanks God for Philemon's faith, and says he prays for him often because of his Christian life and love for God, which is also shown towards the brethren. Paul wishes that Philemon's faith would show itself to everyone. The sense of this statement is all-embracing: "That... thy faith may become effectual by the acknowledging of every good thing which is in you in Christ Jesus."

It means that when we live a full Christian life, obeying every requirement and lacking nothing in faith, we will not only show *ourselves* how wonderful God is, but we will also, by our faith, show *others*, and thus give them encouragement. When we take time to learn what God wants of us, and do it, we start to live as we ought, as companions and servants of the Lord Jesus Christ. This is when we come to know God's blessings in our lives, and help others to know the same.

When we thus pass on this wonderful proof of faith, it becomes "effectual" or active (the Greek being the basis of our English word for 'energy') and powerful. This is when the Gospel takes root and when we stand out as warriors of the Lord. Conversely, when we constantly doubt or express fears, we negatively affect all around us, and they, too, become fearful and doubtful; they lack the same joy and see life only as a series of anxieties and unfulfilled prayers. Before long the whole group becomes pessimistic and never go on to *expect* God to act on their behalf. Thus, our faith – which is very small – is not 'effectual', lacking in power and never reaching any point of real action.

This "good thing" that is in Philemon is also in all who are saved. 'Good thing', *agathos*, is whatever is useful, good by nature, pleasant, joyful, excellent and honourable. Each of us is gifted with these qualities as saved men and women, though few of us actually experience them, because of unbelief, anxiety, or laxity. Yet, it is only when we present them to the world and to ourselves that our Christian lives take on any relevance and meaning. Only then do we see what Christ has in store for us. That is why we must all live boldly for Him, expecting the best in return. We should not hold back because we do not yet know every answer – we must jump forward with boldness and a real expectation that God will act for us and in us.

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Many stand at the thresh-hold of faith, not taking that final jump forward into the arms of Christ, and so never coming to know what He will and can do. Everything is 'but' this and 'but' that; doubt builds upon doubt, when, all along, we *already have* the things that will give us hope and real joy. Sadly, the blinkers of anxiety hide the glorious view before us! God gives us all whatever is needed. When we allow anxiety, fear or doubt to cover it up, we slide backwards into unbelief and never-knowing.

We should live with God's gifts before us, because then we have "great joy and consolation" in the love and care of our fellow believers. Sadly, we rarely see this genuine love spoken of by Paul. Even so, each of us should show it to all believers, whether or not they show it back. Very often, again sadly, few of them recognize you are showing love to them, because they are so busy ignoring you, or thinking untowardly. How 'refreshed' believers are when they know other believers love them truly and support them in truth, simply for being fellow brethren, and for no other gain, even when they themselves act sinfully.

In my ministry, it is true that I sometimes have to speak with hard (not harsh) words, and maybe be confrontational, this being a necessity in certain circumstances. But, this does not in any way mean I am being hateful towards people, nor does it cause me to think badly of them as persons. It is just something that has to be done to reach a far better, holy goal, a moral or spiritual higher ground. Even during these moments a genuine Christian can still love those he must rebuke or speak hard words to. Not to understand this is not to understand Christian life in general.

Paul requests that Philemon should allow him to speak freely and frankly, about a matter that required airing ("that which is convenient"). Paul asks that Philemon should listen to what he had to say, not so much out of duty or command, but as a mark of his love for "Paul the aged". The word used for 'aged' is the same as for presbyter, so Paul asks him to listen not just to an old man, but to one who had office as a church elder. (This is implied and not outwardly stated).

Verses 10-14

1.

I beseech thee for my son Onesimus, whom I have begotten in my bonds:

2.

Which in time past was to thee unprofitable, but now profitable to thee and to me:

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3.

Whom I have sent again: thou therefore receive him, that is, mine own bowels:

4.

Whom I would have retained with me, that in thy stead he might have ministered unto me in the bonds of the gospel:

5.

But without thy mind would I do nothing; that thy benefit should not be as it were of necessity, but willingly.

After this introduction, Paul now pleads with Philemon about his slave, Onesimus ('profitable' or 'useful'... perhaps ironical in the circumstances). Onesimus was a slave, but in Hebrew society slaves were often treated as servants with a lighter hand. Either way, he belonged to Philemon.

Paul says Onesimus was "begotten" when Paul was a prisoner. By this he meant that the slave was saved under his preaching at Rome, the place Onesimus had escaped to. Maybe Paul was reflecting on the slave's name, when he says that "in time past" he was "unprofitable", for the slave had stolen from his master. However, says Paul, the slave was now 'profitable' to both of them. He had helped Paul in Rome, and now could return, if Philemon allowed it, to resume his position as slave and as fellow Christian.

Onesimus must have trusted Paul's judgment, and the characteristic of Christian love, for no escaped slave would otherwise willingly return to his master... the consequences were often very nasty, if not fatal. However, Paul was appealing to Philemon's Christian love, to rise above any feeling of resentment or punishment. Indeed, this is a mark of a genuine Christian, that he can overcome any resentment for being wronged and love the one who wronged him. Yes, it can be hard, but it is an essential characteristic, though I hardly see it today.

Would Philemon accept the slave back, as a favour to Paul? Would he receive him as a friend

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and not just as a slave to be punished? Paul said he would like to have kept Onesimus as his helper, but knew that Philemon had legal charge over him. So, he sent him back, in the hope that Philemon would willingly treat him well.

We should all consider this letter as a primer for our own lives. Who amongst us has never sinned, or done wrong, or been less than perfect in our dealings? Who amongst us can say he always does right or always does what he should? Each of us is a sinner saved by grace and each owes his life to Christ, who forgives every sin we ever commit when we repent. Thus, when a brother or sister sins and offends us, even badly, if he or she repents, the matter is already dealt with by the Father. We may only accept that person as a repentant man or woman, because God has already forgiven them. We have no right to pursue them or continue in rebuke or resentment. That person's 'book' restarts again! The story of that person's life begins anew! That is the essence of repentance – it erases the chapter on sin and re-opens with holiness!

Many Christians refuse to let go of resentment towards another who has offended them. They prefer to harbour inner thoughts against them. This is not good, nor is it holy. Rather, it turns the tables, for the one who caused the resentment is now forgiven, but the one who was offended *himself* becomes sinful by resenting the one who is repentant, and by refusing to accept him back as a brother! It will also affect his whole spirit, slowly destroying joy and disallowing God acting in his own life.

Of course, the repentant-one must show by his actions and words that he truly is repentant. It is wrong to say that because he has inwardly repented to God he need not show it to those human beings he has offended. Far from it. As far as he is able he must make-good the wrong he has committed. Sometimes this is not possible. Nevertheless, he must still live a life that concurs with his alleged repentance. He might make mistakes and may be a bit 'rough edged', but if he claims to have repented we are obliged to accept it if his life is later generally in line with such a claimed state of spirit. If there is any discrepancy it is between himself and God, not a matter for those who look on. We may not continue to punish him, whether in our minds or outwardly.

Paul, then, is providing us with a very clear pattern to follow. Onesimus committed a grave offence against his master, so grave it could possibly have ended in his death. However, Paul was dealing with a fellow Christian and expected him to act as such. Yes, Philemon was deeply offended by a man who stole from him, but Christ makes higher claims! No matter how grave the offence, when a man repents his brethren **MUST** accept that repentance, and allow him to

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begin again. If he feels he cannot do this, then he must himself repent of his attitude.

Verses 15-19

1.

For perhaps he therefore departed for a season, that thou shouldest receive him for ever;

2.

Not now as a servant, but above a servant, a brother beloved, specially to me, but how much more unto thee, both in the flesh, and in the Lord?

3.

If thou count me therefore a partner, receive him as myself.

4.

If he hath wronged thee, or oweth thee ought, put that on mine account;

5.

I Paul have written it with mine own hand, I will repay it: albeit I do not say to thee how thou owest unto me even thine own self besides.

Paul says that perhaps the slave did his deed for a reason that could not be fathomed on this earth; perhaps it was so that he could be saved and later be accepted back by his master, but as an equal. There are times when we all sin, and cannot understand why. Later, that sin we have committed is used as a stepping-stone to better things. Not that God makes anyone sin, of course. But, in this case, a slave ran away a thief, and returned a trusted saved man. If he had not stolen, he would not have met Paul and been converted! This does not make sin acceptable, but it shows that evil can sometimes have a roundabout effect. Sometimes God can direct a soul to betterment after it has done wrong.

Never let this cause us to think it is good to sin! God forbid! Rather, it shows us that God can

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use certain circumstances to turn us from evil to purity. There is an onus on the one who sins to ensure that his life is thereafter pure and holy. In this way he proves himself and shows others that his repentance is valid and genuine. However, the wronged Christian may not look down upon the one who offended him, as though he were himself without sin. No, every one of us is a sinner saved by grace and each of us is liable to sin time and again, maybe not outwardly, but certainly inwardly. Let us, then, with Paul, look kindly upon those who offend us, if they, too, are repentant believers.

Paul goes the extra mile for Onesimus, partly to help him and partly to show Philemon that he means what he says. Please, he asks, accept the man back again, not as a slave but as a fellow believer who Paul loved dearly. If Philemon accepts Paul as his partner in Christ, will he not also accept Onesimus in the same light and as an equal? If he did wrong, Paul was willing to make good the money deficit out of his own pocket, and if he still elicited bad feeling, let both the money and the feeling be laid on Paul's back, that Onesimus may be looked upon well.

Paul confirms that he will indeed repay anything owed, and that is why he wrote the letter himself. Paul then adds a pithy comment: that whilst Paul was willing to recompense in his own person, Philemon ought to bear in mind that he, at one time, owed *his* life to Paul, when he was saved under his preaching. All Paul did was to put the whole matter in perspective by showing that both master and slave owed their lives to Christ through the Gospel, and thus both were equal, and brethren.

Verses 20-25

1.

Yea, brother, let me have joy of thee in the Lord: refresh my bowels in the Lord.

2.

Having confidence in thy obedience I wrote unto thee, knowing that thou wilt also do more than I say.

3.

But withal prepare me also a lodging: for I trust that through your prayers I shall be given unto you.

4.

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There salute thee Epaphras, my fellowprisoner in Christ Jesus;

5.

Marcus, Aristarchus, Demas, Lucas, my fellowlabourers.

6.

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Amen.

Paul, then, hopes Philemon will respond in true Christian fashion, giving him joy. Paul had confidence that Philemon would act wisely and well, if not do far more to show his acceptance of Onesimus.

Paul also asks Philemon to provide a room for himself, for he evidently thought he might be freed from Rome and allowed to travel to Colosse. Though God had guided Paul on many occasions, we see that his hope did not, at this time, match what God would do. As always, this indicates that what God does is in His hands, not ours. What we think He will do might easily be the opposite of what actually happens! This is predestination.

Paul asks Philemon to welcome Epaphras ('lovely'), a fellow prisoner; Marcus ('a defense'), who is the same Mark who wrote the Gospel. His Jewish name was John; he was a cousin to Barnabas and accompanied Paul on some of his journeys. Then there was Aristarchus ('the best ruler') from Thessalonica who travelled with Paul; Demas ('governor of the people'), who had earlier deserted Paul when he became a prisoner at Rome; it seems he had now returned as a fellow preacher and helper. The last name was Lucas (Luke: 'light-giving'), a Gentile Christian who accompanied Paul on his journeys recording his acts; he was a physician, and wrote the Gospel of Luke.

Paul closes his letter with a benediction, that God would give Philemon blessings. Amen (so be it).

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