

Philemon 1-3

Greetings

There are so many voices that compete for our minds and hearts all through the week. The world clamors for our affection and allegiance. But like the apostle Paul, in our heart of hearts, we want to be a prisoner of the Lord Jesus Christ. We desire for our affection and allegiance to be centered on God and His Son, Jesus Christ. So, it is good that on the first day of the week, Sunday, we come together to hear the Word of God, so that our minds and hearts are set in the right direction.

Proverbs 18:21 tells us that "Death and life are in the power of the tongue." Our words have the ability to tear down and destroy someone's life. And they have the power to motivate and encourage and edify another person. Proverbs 25 11 declares, "A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold In settings of silver." And proverbs 15:23 says, "The right word spoken at the right time is beautiful."¹ In Paul's greeting in the letter to Philemon his words are affectionate, tender, and encouraging.

If you remember, Philemon had a household slave named Onesimus. But Onesimus ran away and stole some of Philemon's property or money. And he set out for Rome hoping to disappear in the crowded city. Through the grace of God however, Onesimus came into contact with the apostle Paul who was under house arrest. Paul led Onesimus to faith in Christ and Onesimus became very dear and useful to the apostle.

During their time together, Paul discovered that Onesimus's master was Paul's good friend Philemon. So, he encouraged Onesimus to go back to Philemon. As Christians Onesimus and Philemon need to be reconciled. The goal is for Philemon to forgive Onesimus and to welcome him back as more than a slave, now a brother in Christ. And then perhaps Philemon will set Onesimus free to perhaps return to Rome to freely serve with Paul.

The good news of Jesus Christ is a message of reconciliation. In 2 Corinthians 5:19 we are informed that "that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing their trespasses to them, and has committed to us the word of reconciliation." All of us were run-away sinners in rebellion against God. But God gave His Son to reconcile us to Himself and so Romans 5: 1 states

¹ My paraphrase

“Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.”

And because we are reconciled to God we are reconciled to one another and all of equal value before God. As Galatians 3:28 declares, “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.” This does not mean there are no differences between us, but that our differences find their beauty and purpose as we all stand and serve as equals before God. So, let’s begin our study of Philemon.

Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus,
and Timothy *our* brother,
To Philemon our beloved *friend*
and fellow laborer, ²to the beloved
Apphia, Archippus our fellow soldier,
and to the church in your house:
³Grace to you and peace from God
our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.
(Philemon 1-3)

The apostle’s letter deals mainly with Philemon, but others are included in the greeting, because they all had to form a new relationship with Onesimus. Philemon is addressed as a beloved friend and fellow laborer. He was more than one of the apostle’s colleagues, he was a dear friend as well. There was a deep affection between these two men. They both understood one another’s heart.

Paul was a Jewish believer and Philemon was a Gentile. They came from different cultures. But their hearts were bound together in Christ. There is an old church song titled “The Family of God.” One of the verses reads,

Now you’ll notice we say “brother” and “sister” ‘round here;
It’s because we’re a family and these folks are so dear.
When one has a heartache we all share the tears.
And rejoice in each victory in the family so dear.

In Romans 12:10 we are exhorted to “Be kindly affectionate to one another with brotherly love, in honor giving preference to one another.” In other words, in the family of God I care for you and look out for you and honor you. And you should do the same for me. The apostle claims no divine right to order Philemon to receive Onesimus. But he will plead with him as a friend.

Philemon is also called a fellow laborer. Most likely Paul and Philemon met in Ephesus where Paul stayed and ministered for three years. There are in the

surrounding towns, like Colossae, they worked diligently together to bring people to faith in Christ and to spiritual maturity. In calling Philemon a fellow laborer, the apostle sees his friend as equal in their work before the Lord. I may serve in one way and you in another manner, but we are all fellow laborers—we are all in this thing together.

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and Timothy *our* brother,
To Philemon our beloved *friend*
and fellow laborer, ² to the beloved
Apphia, Archippus our fellow soldier,
and to the church in your house:
(Philemon 1, 2)

The beloved Apphia or as some texts read, “sister Apphia” was most likely Philemon’s wife. To include her in the greeting was unusual. The Roman Empire was highly male dominated. But as in other areas of society and culture Christianity was having an impact. Christianity was teaching men to value and respect women.

A man’s wife was a co-partner with her husband. In 1 Peter 3:7, the apostle Peter describes husband and wife as “*being heirs together of the grace of life.*” A believing husband must be lovingly aware of his wife’s needs, concerns, feelings, opinions and abilities. And he must subordinate his needs and rights to hers. Conversely, the wife must do the same for her husband. In greeting Apphia, the Word of God is stating that she had a right to understand the matter with Onesimus. Apphia would need to form a new relationship with him too.

Archippas, was most surely the pastor of the church that met in Philemon’s home. We know this because of what is written of him in the letter to the Colossians.

Now when this epistle is read among
you, see that it is read also in the church
of the Laodiceans, and that you likewise
read the *epistle* from Laodicea. ¹⁷ And say
to Archippus, “Take heed to the ministry
which you have received in the Lord,
that you may fulfill it.”
(Colossians 4:16, 17)

Paul’s words here were not a criticism of Archippas, but very similar to his exhortation to Timothy.

I charge you therefore before God and the Lord Jesus Christ, who will judge the living and the dead at His appearing and His kingdom: ²Preach the word! Be ready in season *and* out of season. Convince, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and teaching. ³For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, *because* they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers; ⁴and they will turn *their* ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables. ⁵But you be watchful in all things, endure afflictions, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry.
(2 Timothy 4:1-5)

Like Archippas and Timothy we all have a ministry to fulfill. And the apostle Peter encourages all of us to serve for our own good and for the glory of God.

But the end of all things is at hand; therefore be serious and watchful in your prayers. ⁸And above all things have fervent love for one another, for "love will cover a multitude of sins." ⁹Be hospitable to one another without grumbling.

¹⁰As each one has received a gift, minister it to one another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God. ¹¹If anyone speaks, *let him* speak as the oracles of God. If anyone ministers, *let him do it* as with the ability which God supplies, that in all things God may be glorified through Jesus Christ, to whom belong the glory and the dominion forever and ever. Amen.
(1 Peter 4:7-11)

Every single one of us has been granted in the gift of the holy Spirit some ability whereby we can serve the church. And we are stewards of that God-given and God-empowered ability—we are responsible to God and Christ to serve. You are important and needed in the church. When you are not serving something good is missing. The pastor cannot and should not do everything.

Archippas is also called by Paul a fellow soldier. The apostle often wrote of the Christian life as a war. We fight against the darkness to bring the light of God's Word. We fight against hate to bring love. As a leader in the church Archippas had to develop a singleness of mind and heart to serve the Lord. Here is Paul's exhortation to Timothy.

You therefore, my son, be strong
in the grace that is in Christ Jesus.
² And the things that you have
heard from me among many
witnesses, commit these to faithful
men who will be able to teach
others also. ³ You therefore must
endure hardship as a good soldier
of Jesus Christ. ⁴ No one engaged in
warfare entangles himself with the
affairs of *this* life, that he may please
him who enlisted him as a soldier.
⁵ And also if anyone competes in
athletics, he is not crowned unless
he competes according to the rules.
⁶ The hardworking farmer must be
first to partake of the crops. ⁷ Consider
what I say, and may the Lord give you
understanding in all things.
(2 Timothy 2:1-7)

A good soldier called to duty cuts himself off from the normal affairs of life. The good soldier of Christ must not allow the things of the world to lure him away from his work. The athlete needs concentrated practice to be skilled in his or her sport. Ad the farmer labors under every condition to produce a good harvest. It really takes work, at times hard work to bring the light of God's Word and God's love to people. But the rewards in the age to come are well worth the effort. Writing to church leaders, Peter wrote,

The elders who are among you I exhort,
I who am a fellow elder and a witness
of the sufferings of Christ, and also a

partaker of the glory that will be revealed:
² Shepherd the flock of God which is among
you, serving as overseers, not by compulsion
but willingly, not for dishonest gain but eagerly;
³ nor as being lords over those entrusted to you,
but being examples to the flock; ⁴ and when the
Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the
crown of glory that does not fade away.
(1 Peter 5: 1-4)

A crown of glory that does not fade away! Now, that's a reward worth
striving for.

Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus,
and Timothy *our* brother,
To Philemon our beloved *friend*
and fellow laborer, ² to the beloved
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(Philemon 1, 2)

This letter is also addressed to the church in Philemon's home. The Greek
word translated "church" is ekklesia and it means a called-out assembly of
people. It is never used of the place of worship. This Greek word was also used in
the Old testament to describe the assembly of God's people. And it is good and
necessary for every Christian to be a part of a local fellowship or church.

In the beginning God said to Adam, "*It is not good that man should be
alone.*"² And the same is true for the believer in Christ. We need the comradery,
the fellowship, the prayers and loving service of others. Psalm 92:13 says, "Those
who are planted in the house of the Lord shall flourish in the courts of our God."
And in Hebrews 10, we are exhorted,

And let us consider one another in
order to stir up love and good works,
²⁵ not forsaking the assembling of
ourselves together, as *is* the manner
of some, but exhorting *one another*,
and so much the more as you see
the Day approaching.
(Hebrews 10:24, 25)

² Genesis 2:18

We are all gifted to serve, and we need one another to be our best for God. The apostle Paul wants the church in Philemon's home to know about Onesimus, because they all must welcome him back as a brother in Christ. Now finally, verse 3

Grace to you and peace from God
our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.
(Philemon 3)

To meet the challenge concerning Onesimus—indeed to meet all of our daily challenges to our faith, hope and love, we need more than human resolve and strength. We need grace and peace.

This is not just a throw away line. The apostle always believed that his presence, his words and his actions, would be a means of sharing God's grace with others resulting in peace. Do you think of yourself as one who brings God's grace and peace to others? You should! Let's re-read Peter's words about all of us being gifted to serve.

But the end of all things is at hand;
therefore be serious and watchful
in your prayers. ⁸ And above all
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another, for "love will cover a
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God's grace, His kindness, love and encouragement can be seen in all that we do and say, in a kaleidoscope of ways. All of us Christians are the salt of the earth and the light of the world. Therefore, let all that we do and say bring good to others and glory to God.

