

A Plea to Love

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[0 : 00] You might have the letter to Philemon open.

I won't take one particular verse as a text or one particular line, but refer to different parts of this letter as we go this evening.

I think many of you will have heard people in the world around us saying, well, the Bible doesn't say anything about that, so we can't know what is right or wrong.

You might say, well, where does it say that in the Bible? Or if the word is there, it will be used in a certain way. Anyway, many folk will be the first to tell us how simple the answer is and how, therefore, the church behaves in the wrong way.

And slavery is one of those things. And in particular, as you look in the New Testament, you have a letter such as Philemon, and then you have other letters of Paul where slavery is mentioned.

[1 : 22] And then we're told that in the light especially of what he says here in Philemon, that the Bible is inconsistent, that this is a rejection of slavery.

Philemon is therefore seen as the best of Paul as far as that's concerned. But I'm not sure that that's what Philemon is about. And that's how we do need to approach the Bible, God's word, is to find out what is the main issue that is being dealt with.

Yes, Paul does want Philemon to accept his slave back. That's Onesimus, named in verse 10. He does want him to accept him back.

Philemon was clearly the slave owner, perhaps therefore a wealthy man. Onesimus had been a slave. His name means useful, but he had proved to be useless. And now, in verse 11, he is useful both to you and to me.

Paul wants Philemon, the master, to take his slave back. But he wants him to come back with a different relationship. Now, the question should be, why can't he just say that in a few lines?

[2 : 47] The background to this is that in the days of Paul, most letters, Philemon, we recognize as one of his, indeed his very shortest of letters.

We see it as his shortest letter. But in those days, Philemon was a long letter by comparison with most of them. So, in other words, if it was simply to send him back with a recommendation, here's a good guy, he's turned around, take him back, and you'll find him useful.

He could have said it just like that. But he doesn't, does he? There's more that he has to say.

There's more that he's interested in. More that he's concerned about.

And I would summarize it this way and then open it up a little bit, I trust, this evening. Paul's concern here is to minister a reconciliation, to do it practically, to give a practical example of what Christian love is in the way that he writes.

He says, I could have ordered you, I could have commanded you, but I'm not doing that. I'm working through several things for your benefit, for the benefit of the church that was with Philemon in Colossae, and for us ever since.

[4 : 11] He's concerned about what love really looks like. He mentions the church that Philemon was familiar with, and it looks good.

Love is fine when things are easy. But what about when it's not so easy to love? And it's this that Paul lays out for us.

And it means that the status of a slave and a master is almost incidental. What about loving Paul? Because that is actually the bulk of what he's writing. Because Onesimus goes under Paul's wing in this case. Paul is saying, well, if I can persuade you about me and what I'm asking, then Onesimus will follow a new relationship.

And so what Paul does in this letter is, first of all, he says, Philemon, let's take a look at your love for the saints. Let's do that first.

[5 : 19] And then we will take a look at your love for strangers. Let me endeavor to explain. The first part is his look, where he looks with Philemon, at his love for the saints.

I mentioned Colossae. Philemon is at Colossae. We discover that in several different ways, both here and also in the letter to the Colossians that we're familiar with.

We also discover through the account in the book of Acts and so on, that Paul has never been, by this stage, he has never been to Colossae himself.

So Paul has not done something like this in the Colossian church. He's not stood up or taught the people face to face.

He's written to them. In fact, it seems that Onesimus was probably carrying two letters, this one to his master and also the one that we know as the letter to the Colossians.

[6 : 25] And with Philemon and Colossae, Paul never having been there by this stage, have they met? Well, it is possible. Ephesus is, for us, not too far away, further away in those days, more difficult to get to.

And you may remember that Paul spent quite some time in Ephesus ministering there. So it is just possible that they had met. I don't think we're given a clear, a confident position on that, that they did meet.

There are suggestions, I think, in the words that Paul uses that maybe they still hadn't met. But through Paul's ministry in Ephesus, Philemon seems to have come to faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. But it's distinctly possible that they had no substantial personal relationship yet. And Paul is working on the question of love for one another, Paul and Philemon.

He's coming to that in a moment. So what he does first, he talks about Philemon's love and of the faith, verse 5, and of the faith that you have towards the Lord Jesus and all the saints, especially his love for the saints.

[7 : 49] He works with that. He knows about the setting of the church, and he knows about the place and the role that Philemon himself has.

He's kind of the host, we discover in verse 2, where the church would meet in those days. Not belonging to Philemon, the house belongs to him, and the church would meet there.

And in some ways, perhaps that's the leading way in which Philemon does show his love for the church, for the saints, for the believers. Philemon would appear to be a wealthy man or one of the wealthier men, and he is able to demonstrate his heart to them, to the rest of the church.

But it's a demonstration that he is, as Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 5, that he is a new creature.

He's a new creation. He's a new man. He's been changed by his faith in the Lord Jesus. And he shows love towards his fellow believers in Colossae.

[8 : 58] Paul says this, when I hear about this, it's a great joy and comfort or encouragement, in verse 7.

I've derived it. I hear about these things. And I'm joyful, I'm comforted or encouraged when I hear about it. When I hear, in a beautiful phrase, he says, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you.

It's not done in this building, is it, to, in an occasion like this, to look around and look at each other. But you need to do it sometime, especially if you come early and get the back seat.

Watch one another coming in and say, I love that person. They're wonderful people in Christ. What a blessing they are. What a blessing we are to each other.

And refresh one another's hearts as you think of each other, as you speak to each other. I think it was, perhaps, especially through Philemon's particular gifts, literal gifts, that he was able to encourage and refresh.

[10 : 08] He was able to help materially for those in need. You know as well as I do that there are many other ways, too. A word in season, a word of encouragement, where you've been comforted.

Making sure that we don't throw out the words that are harmful, which happens too easily, too, doesn't it? But what a wonderful thing.

Take it with you. The value of refreshing the hearts of the saints. Psalm 122. Why do you enjoy to come to the house of the Lord, praying for peace and felicity, for the peace of the brothers and sisters?

It's wonderful to hear, as Paul was at that time, of hearing of Christian fellowships, where there's happiness, where there's growth, where there's encouragement, one or the other.

It's encouraging. And to hear of someone or several people who make special contributions to that. But you know what I think, and it's not original to me, Paul does it here.

[11:16] He hears of such a one and he says, can this man grow even further in his faith and what comes from that faith? In the more difficult aspects of the Christian life, based on the progress he's already made.

You see, it can be all very well to have a rosy picture when you're with people who think just like you. People who look just like you.

People who use the same accent as you do. Or language. People who come with a similar cultural background. Perhaps in a generally similar social position.

He's my kind of guy. That can make it easier. But what about people who don't fit? Except that they are Christians.

Somebody described this as the collision of culture and faith. And we meet that collision every single day, whether we recognize it or not.

[12:32] And in that collision, what comes off worse? Which one keeps on going down the road of your life? Is it the culture? Or is it challenged and set back by faith?

The ways of the Lord Jesus that he speaks to us? And this is the kind of question that Paul is concerned about as he picks up with Philemon.

He talks about himself. We don't know each other well. Maybe I'm a stranger to you. He comes shortly to talk about Onesimus.

He's a man who has wronged you. It would suggest, and the way that Paul is writing, verse 18, if he has wronged you at all or owes you anything, charge that to my account.

The suggestion is that perhaps as Onesimus ran away, which was a crime in itself, he maybe also stole something from his master.

[13:36] If he has wronged you at all, how are you going to respond to him? You love the saints. That's evident. And I rejoice in that. I'm comforted, encouraged by it.

But let's think a little bit further, Philemon. It's not to say that even the love for the saints, the ones that are familiar, the ones that have a similar cultural background and so on, it's not to say that's entirely easy.

You know that, don't you? But yet Paul says it's a very good foundation of Christian living and one that can be built on, one that can be developed.

Loving one other person, loving anyone, is to put myself to the back of the picture. Do you like doing that? Not naturally, you don't.

None of us do. That's our greatest pitfall in life. But it is Christian love. You know that, perhaps, for many of you, a very familiar passage in Philippians chapter 2, verses 5 to 11, where Paul talks about the mind that was in Christ Jesus, who, being God, didn't think it was equality with God, was anything to be held on to, to cling on to.

[14:53] But he humbled himself. He took our form on him. And he was obedient. Obedient to death. You know that passage. And it's a wonderful passage describing the mind of the Lord Jesus towards us.

And that is just what Paul is working with here. It's putting myself lower than the other. That is what Christ did. He had our interest before his.

And that's given to us there in Philippians 2 as a pattern for us. That's why he uses it there. What about our behavior towards others?

You know, perhaps, 1 Corinthians 13. If I have knowledge and I don't have love, I'm nothing, and so on. The Bible has much to say about love.

And Philemon's love for the saints is clearly evident. It's something that can be seen. It's not just something within, an emotion or a sentiment.

[16:02] It's something that must be evident if it is true love. And perhaps, as I've said, it was evident in Philemon through generosity.

Much like in the early days of the church in Acts 2, chapter 4, where it tells us that there were those who had money and land. They would bring it together.

They would sell the land and they would, everyone had it in common so that those who were in need were no longer in need. And it's, along those lines, it would seem Philemon was probably behaving, which was love for the saints, refreshing their hearts.

rather than tearing them down, rather than leaving them apprehensive as to what the future would hold. And the spirit of it, that humble kindness, Barnabas, the encourager, all of these things. Philemon's love was noticeable and it reached Paul's ears. And Paul, in this letter, seizes the opportunity and he says, if that's where we are, it's a good beginning.

[17:14] Let's see that grow. We can never reach the limits. It must be put to the test. And here is the test for Philemon.

It's all very good with people of his own circle. Colossians. What about someone outside that circle? And so Paul asks Philemon to love him.

Verse 9 says, I could have, verse 8 says, I could have commanded you, yet verse 9, for love's sake, I prefer to appeal to you.

Let me talk a little about love for the stranger. Not the stranger as in completely unknown, but not quite the same as the saints that he's spending time with.

Perhaps a parallel would be if you were to, if I were to give you a name of perhaps once upon a time it would be Billy Graham, the great evangelist.

[18:17] You know the names of Sinclair Ferguson. Perhaps you think of Jeff Thomas who I think is in town this weekend. Others, Stephen Lawson, Charles Price, other preachers that you've had here.

Well-known names. your favorite online preachers or writers. And if one of them, a letter from them landed on your doorstep one day and said, I want you to do me a favor.

I appeal to you on the basis of love. Verse 9. You've not met them. Does he have a claim on your life? Would you obey him?

Maybe. Maybe not. If he said, in Christ, I could command you to do what is required, how would you respond?

Or how would you respond if he said, but I'm going to appeal to you out of love? What Paul is working out here, he's more interested in building the Christian spirit than doing the Christian work.

[19:36] There is Christian work to be done. We must desire it. We must pursue it. We must be diligent about it, but it could be done with the wrong spirit. And Paul is busy about building a strong spirit, a spirit that will last, beyond the immediate, a spirit that will help through the things that Paul is not, doesn't think to talk about here.

He doesn't specify other things, but yet building the right Christian spirit will carry Philemon through. And that's why he writes the letter in the way that he does.

Again, I go back to this. He could so easily have just written verses 8 and 9, thereabouts, or into verse 10. I could have commanded you, I'm not going to, I'm going to appeal to you, please take Onesimus back.

He still could have done that, appealing in love. But what he's doing in this letter is living that love, showing Philemon, showing us what that love looks like.

Patient, deliberate, repeated appeals, repeatedly laying himself on the line.

[21:02] He's encouraging, he's nurturing, and he's looking on Philemon as the new creation, the new man who will take the spirit of God and will grow, will respond.

How will he respond? Well, Paul doesn't know. He asks his favor from verse 10, I appeal to you for my child, Onesimus. But in this process of developing Philemon's mind and heart, he takes away, he works through, and he takes away every possible reason that Philemon might have to hesitate. And these are things that we should reflect on. We should take to heart ourselves. Paul himself says to Philemon, look at the scale of my love. I will take any wrong, any charge to my own account. He does remind Philemon that his own life in Christ has come to him through Paul. In verse 19 again, well, I will repay the charge, but you owe me even your own self.

He's talking about this new life that Philemon also shares. And you owe that to me. Remember that. Remember those that have contributed. Remember them with great affection.

[22:28] but remember them too with practical response. That's what Paul is saying here. But Paul is doing one other thing that I would highlight and that is he is humbly appreciating that Philemon can also bless him.

That is Paul the apostle. Verse 20, I want some benefit from you in the Lord. And again, that phrase, refresh my heart in Christ. See what you're doing for these other saints.

Can I share in that too? I'd love to share in that too. He says it to the Romans when he writes to them. He says, I want to come and have some ministry to you and you to me as well.

There's a two-way street every time for those that minister the gospel of life among you. All this time Onesimus is riding under the wings of Paul.

Will Philemon accept him for the sake of Paul? Will Philemon recognize that when Paul says in verse 10, I became Onesimus' father in my imprisonment?

[23 : 43] He's talking about new spiritual life. But Onesimus is not only a slave, verse 16, but a beloved brother. But now they're both.

They are brothers. Both, as it were, offspring of the faith. Offspring of Paul in the faith. Your brothers through Paul and his ministry.

Paul does make a very significant request regarding Onesimus. It would be very difficult, I'm sure, because of the impact of what Onesimus did.

But all this time, Paul is putting himself in the firing line. I will stand for Onesimus. I will stand for him. He's a vulnerable brother. It reminds me of his Lord, who stands in our place to bring us through and to ask the Lord himself, our God, to accept us as those who have done him much wrong.

And Paul is pleading because he can see potential. He can see potential in Philemon. Why? Because he is a new man, a new creation.

[25 : 07] man of wealth, but it was taking away any distinction that there is between human beings.

He's a man. He's a brother. How will you respond to him? How will you respond to the brother or the one who will become a brother in the Lord, who walks in here, tomorrow, the next day?

How will we respond? Will we receive them for the sake of the love of our God in Christ? Here the apostle approaches another man and he can humble himself before him.

This is a great act of love on his part. Philemon, will you follow me? will you humble yourself? This love is a great thing, love for the brothers.

How far does it go? You can know 1 Corinthians 13 and not have love. You know all that about the necessity of love, but you might not have that love.

[26 : 27] Pray that you will, that you will live by that word of God. Paul writes that other letter, 1 Corinthians and that chapter, verse 13, this is it in real life.

This is what he is doing. You know that deals with such things to keep no record of wrongs. He's saying to Philemon, don't keep a record of those wrongs or if you do, dump them on me and I'll deal with them.

Back to that question about slavery. Paul doesn't actually deal with it, does he? Not really. No longer as a slave, well, no longer just as a slave, more than a slave.

Philemon, it was up to him. Would he release him? He could be set free officially, but if that's all it was, they would still be bound in their spirit, slave and master.

this is a better way dealing with the encouraging love between Christian brothers. Now, why am I saying all this?

[27 : 35] Why have I drawn your attention to all this this evening? First, because it's necessary. It's at the very heart of the gospel and its life, wherever you are, and I am.

Loving the stranger, not just at arm's length, death. But when they walk in the door, you invite them to your home, you lift them up out of desperate straits, and who knows, maybe not just now, but they are one of God's saints.

His hand is on them through you. Galatians chapter 5 tells us, and we rejoice in the freedom we have in the Lord Jesus.

Galatians chapter 5, Paul says, for you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, and you know that, but through love, serve one another. That's what Paul is teasing out. That's what he's living out as he writes this long letter to a dear brother. You grow in grace.

[28 : 56] You yourself grow in grace by serving one another. Paul is saying here, let's start here.

I could order you, but I'm pleading with you. I'm humbling myself. Pleading is to go down on the knees and to look stupid. I'm humbling myself.

Pleading with you. I want you to remember that you do owe me a debt. But here Paul puts himself in debt, even to Philemon.

Will you please give me this? And in so many ways it portrays to us our master, our Lord Jesus. He's my Lord, but he's my ransom.

He puts himself in the firing line. He gives himself in my place. He loves me. If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing. [30 : 07] Love does not dishonor others. It is not self-seeking. It is not easily angered. It keeps no record of wrongs. Philemon, learn love.

Grow that love that you have demonstrated. Is this a letter about slavery? Yes. But it's for every Christian, every believer to escape the slavery of pride for the freedom of love through Christ, in Christ.

Do I make Christ's choices my choices? That I should love you, that we love one another, because Christ first loved us.

And as we call him the apostle of love, John, writing in 1 John chapter 3, for you at such a time as this and the weekend of communion, we know that we have passed out of death into life because we love the brothers.

We know that we have life. We've passed out of death because we love the brothers. the Pauls, the Onesimuses, the other Philomones, one another.

[31 : 39] We know that we've passed out of death into life if we love the brothers. Just so far this evening, may God grant blessing building us up in the faith and the love of the faith.

Let us pray together. Lord our God, we pray that you will build in our hearts that this love that we might know a seed of, a taste of, that we might know even an immature plant of, and for some who have come to greater maturity yet that we should grow still, that there should be that fresh bud and blossom of faith and love within this fellowship, within the fellowship of your people throughout this town and island.

We pray for the wonderful overcoming impact of the love of our Lord Jesus pouring out through our hearts into the lives of many.

Gracious God, we thank you for that love beyond comparison of our Lord Jesus, that vast gulf between where he came from and what he bore for our sake.

Lord God, stir in us, we pray, a response of love poured out into those that you would call, and those that are beyond our knowledge but yet you are calling.

[33 : 44] May we have that sight of faith. May we have that sight of faith. May we have faith. May we hear your voice leading us.

Pray that these things might also encourage us where we can reflect on the change of our lives where we have been found able to love, to encourage, and to refresh one another.

May this encourage us that you are present in our hearts and our lives and cause us to rejoice one for the other as we share together in these coming days.

And especially when your table, the gift of our Lord Jesus, the demonstration of that wonderful gift is laid before us. in him we would ask all things.

Pray that you would be near to us and again commanding to you the further events of this evening and tomorrow especially, and the folk who are going through this time of bereavement.

[35 : 06] Pray in all things that your love will be upon us richly for the glory of your name. Through our Lord Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.

Let us close by singing together Psalm 133. We will take the Sing Psalms version. It's on page 175. Psalm 133.

Psalm 133. And again, let's stand to sing.

Psalm 133. Psalm 133. Psalm 133. How blessed the thing it is, how blessed and how good, when brothers dwell in unity, and live as brothers should.

But it is like the precious fire, for down on eons' hair, the crowning over down his fear, upon his father's head.

[37 : 11] I am one skew upon the hill of Zion in his head.

The Lord restores his blessing there, the life that never ends.

Just before we receive the Lord's blessing, just to say that, given the circumstances, I will not be at the door to greet you this evening. Now may God grant his blessing to us.

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen. Amen.