

# Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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## Short letters in the New Testament: Philemon - Healthy Relationships

Paul's short letter to Philemon is one of healthy Christian relationships. Philemon 1-2 show that it was primarily addressed to Philemon, but also to Apphia (who many think was his wife), to Archippus (who many think was their son) and to the church, who met in their house at Colossae. It's about a slave named Onesimus who had run away from Philemon. In the providence of God, Onesimus met Paul in prison in Rome and consequently had come to saving faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. Paul and Timothy wrote to Philemon asking that Onesimus be accepted back and their relationship as slave and master restored, not as it was previously, but now on a proper Christian basis. The letter shows how believers should interact with each other and have healthy relationships.

Paul describes his fellow believers in Philemon 1-2: Timothy as a "brother", Philemon as a "*beloved friend*" (Philemon 1) and "*fellow labourer*" (Philemon 1), Apphia as "*beloved*" (Philemon 2) and Archippus as a "*fellow soldier*" (Philemon 2). You get the impression that Paul appreciated the healthy Christian relationship he had with each one of them. Such healthy relationships are based upon wholesome faith and nourished by sound, or healthy, doctrine (see Titus 1:9 and Titus 1:13). Let's look at these relationships.

Timothy is deliberately described as "*our brother*" (Philemon 1). Paul could have introduced himself as an apostle and Timothy as his "second-in-command" but that would have put Philemon on a different level to them. It would have been inappropriate in a letter designed to appeal "*for love's sake*" (Philemon 8) on behalf of Onesimus, who had become a brother in the Lord. Yes, believers are related to each other as brothers and sisters in the family of God. As the children of God, they love each other. "*Whoever believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God, and everyone who loves Him who begot also loves him who is begotten of Him. By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and keep His commandments*" (1 John 5:1-2).

Philemon is a "*beloved friend*." The adjective "beloved" primarily means "loved by God the Father". But, as 1 John 5:1-2 has reminded us, it also means that Paul and Timothy loved Philemon as a brother in God's family. Moreover, Paul addressed Philemon in Philemon 7 as "my brother". This acted to further strengthen Paul's plea for Onesimus. Christian friendship is much more than natural friendship, because it's based on divine love. Paul also recognised that Philemon had involved himself in the work of the Lord and so he's also called "our fellow labourer". Philemon is seen as co-equal with them striving side by side for the faith of the Gospel. Philemon's contribution was as important as Paul's or Timothy's. I've personally found this kind of companionship to be true in all Gospel work that I've participated in. As Paul pointed out in 1 Corinthians 3:5-9, it's God who works through His different servants, who He uses in a variety of ways to achieve His purpose. They're nothing. He's everything!

Apphia is also called "*beloved*." Paul regards her as a sister in the family of God. He's also conscious that she would be running the household alongside her husband Philemon. Her agreement to the return of Onesimus was also vital!

Archippus is described as "our fellow soldier". In the Lord's army there are no ranks. All believers are necessary to fight the battle. In fact, each is chosen by the Lord for a particular aspect of His work (see 2 Timothy 2:3-4). In their differing roles, Christian soldiers serve side by side and they obey their Captain, the Lord Jesus. That's why Paul instructed Archippus, "*Take heed to the ministry which you have received in the Lord, that you may fulfil it*" (Colossians 4:17). Paul knew he could rely on Archippus to bravely stand with him against all the opposition to the Lord's work that they encountered.

Finally, notice the healthy relationships in Philemon's family. The Lord's interests were of paramount importance in their family life. They used their home as a meeting place for the Colossian church.

To summarise Philemon 1-3, healthy relationships between Christians means that they really and truly appreciate each other. The obvious challenge from these opening verses is do I view other believers in these ways? Do I appreciate and value them as people I can serve alongside? Do I treat them like brothers or sisters of God's family? Do I love them as God the Father loves them? Other believers should not just be tools for me to use in God's service. They should be fellow labourers and beloved friends. So let's ask ourselves if there are ways in which we can show the believers we know that we appreciate them, and that we value them as friends? Perhaps you could ask someone

to help you in some Christian service, whether church-based or a more personal work. Could you both labour together in the Lord's work?

Philemon 4-7 read, *"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"* (New King James Version).

In Philemon 4-7, we learn the secret of the healthy relationship that existed between Paul and Philemon. They prayed for each other. In Philemon 4, Paul said he was always thankful to God for Philemon. I wonder if it's true of me that my friends thank God for me? Do I thank God for them and other believers? Philemon 5 tells us that Philemon was well-known for his love and faith. We, too, should thank God for the evidences of love and faith in other believers. It's easy to understand that Philemon would love the Lord and have faith in Him. But Paul didn't stop there. He said *"and toward all the saints"* ("saints" is another New Testament name for believers). In a general sense, it's also easy to understand how Philemon loved all the believers, although it's very impressive that he actually did so! But how did he show faith towards all the believers? Does it mean that he had confidence in them in the sense that we might use it today? That he believed the best about them and assumed that they would act in righteous ways? According to 1 Corinthians 13, this is how love acts in the church. The lesson for us today is not to be cynical of other believers' motives. But the challenge is to look for good before assuming any bad! It certainly is a challenge to me to live in such a Christ-like way that I'm known for my love for, and faith in, other believers.

Paul also prayed for Philemon's testimony. Philemon 6 says he prayed that Philemon would be able to share his faith in an effective way. In the Colossian church, Philemon was an example of godliness. In his neighbourhood, Philemon must have had a bright testimony. Paul prayed that Philemon's testimony would be fully effective and that it would fully benefit all, whether saint or sinner, who knew him. That's a good way for us to pray for each other!

In Philemon 7, Philemon is given high praise, *"the hearts of the saints have been refreshed by you, brother."* Paul appreciated Philemon, and by the sound of it so did many other believers. They appreciated the way in which Philemon served them and refreshed them. Paul derived great joy and comfort from this evidence of Philemon's practical love for other believers. Let's challenge ourselves to be the kind of people that refresh other believers and try to build up rather than tear down. And let's also be more thankful for those believers who do refresh our hearts and encourage us. Yes, spiritually healthy Christians do appreciate each other!

The second section of the letter is Philemon 8-16. *"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. 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."*

Paul now raised the issue of Onesimus, the runaway slave. Paul didn't use his authority as an apostle to command Philemon to obey. No, Paul wrote lovingly and thoughtfully to Philemon. This is an example of how we should speak to other believers. In Philemon 8, Paul affirmed his right to use his apostolic authority. He could have told Philemon what fitting Christian behaviour was expected of him and instructed him to do it. But *"for love's sake"* he didn't. Rather, Paul appealed to Philemon and left the choice to him. This gracious manner of Paul's is a challenge to any who endeavour to lead the people of God. If I were to approach a fellow believer with a suggestion for him to act in a certain way in a given situation, would I always think about the most loving way in which to deal with the subject? I may even feel I'm entitled to issue instructions to others. May all of my interactions with other believers be characterised by Paul's *"for love's sake"* attitude!

In Philemon 10, Paul describes Onesimus as *"my son"*. Paul became Onesimus' spiritual father when the latter heard and believed the Gospel from him whilst in prison. If people are saved when we share the Gospel with them, they likewise become our children in the faith. God gives us the privilege and responsibility for their spiritual nurture. May the Lord give each of us children in the faith!

The name Onesimus means "useful or profitable". Philemon 11 then is a bit of a play on words! Paul states upfront that he appreciated that Onesimus had been anything but useful to Philemon. In fact he says Onesimus was formerly useless! But, now that he had been converted, he had truly become "useful" to Paul in prison. But Paul recognised this meant he would also be "useful" to Philemon. Yes, the Gospel changes people for the better!

In Philemon 12, Paul recognised that it was only proper Christian conduct to send Onesimus back to Philemon. Onesimus was still owned by Philemon. He was his slave and he had wronged him. Paul sent him back, not with the expectation that Philemon would punish him, but with a request for Philemon to forgive and receive him. Onesimus had repented of all his wrong doings when he believed the Gospel. Philemon could forgive him and receive him because God already had done so in Christ. Paul wished to retain Onesimus with him because he was greatly helped by Onesimus' service to him in prison. He recognised that Onesimus was actually serving him on Philemon's behalf, although the latter was unaware of it. But Paul wouldn't act without Philemon's consent. And rather than making any demands, he was anxious that Philemon voluntarily took back Onesimus as a brother in the Lord. More than that, he beseeched Philemon to welcome him as he would have welcomed Paul. So, in Philemon 17, he described Philemon as his "partner", with whom he shared everything together as an equal.

If this was to be the basis of the new master/slave relationship, why had God allowed Philemon to suffer the loss of a slave, and possibly the loss of profit as a result? In Philemon 15, Paul suggested to Philemon that the sovereignty of God was the reason why Onesimus ran away. Paul was not dogmatic about the matter, but inferred it was the way God took to save Onesimus, so that Philemon would see the bigger picture. He would now benefit from the services of a Christian slave, who also had become a "beloved brother" for eternity. God alone could bring good out of this situation for both Onesimus and Philemon. So the challenge is, are we prepared to suffer for the sake of the Gospel? How much loss of income would we be prepared to endure if it meant someone being saved and becoming our beloved brother or sister? How much would I be prepared to be wronged by someone if it was a link in the chain to their being saved? Useless Onesimus had become useful since he was saved. This is a challenge to us never to write people off as beyond hope. No matter their faults before they are saved, the case of Onesimus reminds us that the Gospel is powerful enough to change anyone. By God's grace, once "useless" people can become "useful"!

What a testimony to the grace of God this whole incident was! In one sense, the three characters couldn't have been more different: wealthy Philemon; Paul the apostle; and Onesimus the runaway slave. Yet such is the grace of God that these three different men became beloved brothers. We're also part of the family of God because the grace of God has united us to love the Lord Jesus Christ, who saved us.

The next section is Philemon 17-22. *"If then you count me as a partner, receive him as you would me. 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. But, meanwhile, also prepare a guest room for me, for I trust that through your prayers I shall be granted to you."*

Although Onesimus had been saved, he was still a slave, who had wronged his master. In Philemon 18-21 we see that healthy Christian relationships also involve putting right any wrongs. Paul was even willing to bear the cost of Onesimus' misdemeanours himself. He asked Philemon to put the debt and the hurt onto his account. This is a remarkable statement! Would I be willing to bear the cost of someone else's wrong? How far would I go to restore a relationship between two brothers? We get the impression that in some way Philemon owed Paul for his spiritual well-being; but Paul didn't use that against him. He was still willing to make the necessary recompense for Onesimus. Proper Christian behaviour required that Onesimus return to face the consequences of his wrong-doing. Healthy Christian relationships ensured that this was achieved in a righteous manner on the basis of brotherly love.

I don't think Paul ever had to pay any of Onesimus' debt. Maybe he knew this would be the case. He was confident that Philemon would again practise all the things he had commended Philemon for in the first 7 verses. He was confident that Philemon would also show love and faith to Onesimus. What an effective sharing that was! What would it have been if Philemon had reacted differently towards Onesimus because he had caused him to suffer loss? It would have sent out a worldly tit-for-tat message. How contrary that is to God's unbelievable grace towards us. Paul was confident that Philemon would live out all of the practical realities of the doctrines of forgiveness and reconciliation with Onesimus. Paul encouraged Philemon to act in these ways by stating that such actions would refresh his heart. Do we see that kind of faith at work in our own lives today? Do we show faith and love towards saints who have harmed us or upset us? Will we show brotherly love even when it really costs us? Do I? Do I appreciate the changing power of the Gospel and rejoice to see God at work in changing my life and the lives of others?

One more thing to notice in this section is found in Philemon 21-22. Paul says that he's confident that Philemon will do even more than what was required. He knew that Philemon wasn't the type of Christian who would be bound by the minimum required to be done. Philemon always used such opportunities to go above and beyond that to show even more love. That is demonstrated in Philemon 22, where Paul is confident that there would be a room awaiting him in Philemon's house upon his release from prison. Are we known for that kind of attitude? Do I do the minimum possible for other believers and then sit back confident that I have satisfied God's commands? Or am I always on the lookout for opportunities to do "even more" than is required of me? Brotherly love is not a requirement to be ticked off on a tick

list. In fact very little of New Testament teaching is like that. Rather it's an attitude of life that's always looking for ways to serve others and show them love and kindness.

In Philemon 23-24, Paul calls his friends his "*fellow workers*" in God's service. All of them seem to know and appreciate Philemon. On their behalf, Paul sends Christian greetings. As the founder of the Colossian church, Epaphras had a special relationship with them. "*Epaphras, who is one of you, a bondservant of Christ, greets you, always labouring fervently for you in prayers, that you may stand perfect and complete in all the will of God*" (Colossians 4:12). Then there was Mark, who had previously let Paul down. Their relationship was now fully restored. Aristarchus was a faithful companion in Paul's journeys. Demas later gave up. "*Demas has forsaken me, having loved this present world*" (2 Timothy 4:10). But the beloved physician, Luke, supported Paul through all kinds of trials and difficulties - to the very end of the apostle's life.

The letter ends in Philemon 25 with Paul asking the Lord Jesus Christ to bestow His all-sufficient grace upon Philemon for this special task. (In Philemon 3, he had opened his letter to Philemon with this blessing. "*Grace to you and peace from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.*") As we aim to have healthy relationships with all the believers we know, how much we need to rely on the peace and grace God daily showers upon us!

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