



CAPITOL COMMISSION

Being Partners (Philemon 8-17)

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Philemon 8-9.

⁸ Accordingly, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do what is required, ⁹ yet for love's sake I prefer to appeal to you—I, Paul, an old man and now a prisoner also for Christ Jesus—

FOR LOVE'S SAKE

We come to the portion of the text where we find the purpose of this letter identified, namely the welcoming of Onesimus as a brother in Christ. Up to this point, Paul and Timothy's letter to Philemon, Affia, Archipus and the church has been filled with words of encouragement for Philemon's faith and love. He was a man who had an active faith in Jesus Christ and expressed this belief by refreshing the hearts of the saints.

On the basis of this framework, Paul begins his appeal. He reminds Philemon that he could have approached this situation differently. He could have mandated the acceptance of Onesimus by the sheer weight of his apostolic authority. The text makes clear that he had not only the authority but also the inclination of making such a demand. Yet something held him back. It was something for Paul that trumped his authority and boldness to make this situation right in an expedient manner. It was quite simply the love he had for his dear friend. Philemon's acceptance of Onesimus was as essential to Paul as the restoration of Onesimus. Only through Jesus Christ could both purposes be accomplished.

We find Paul reflecting upon his current life situation. Not only is he an old man, he is also a prisoner for the sake of Christ Jesus. The Greek can provide us some valuable insight about Paul's age. "In a common reckoning of the "seven ages" of a man, the "presbutes" was the second oldest, from 50 to 56."¹ Since this does not indicate someone near the end of their life or with failing powers, Paul is not seeking to rely on Philemon's compassion. Rather, through the maturity that forms over these many years, he understands that the results he seeks may matter little if Christian fellowship is sacrificed along the way. Added to this insight is the fact that his imprisonment is for Jesus' sake. He is dependent on the generosity of the saints and all this by the hand of Jesus.

APPLICATION:

What would we rather; the authority to right every wrong or a heart of love that willingly sacrifices ourselves for those we seek to serve? Often we can see so clearly what others need to do. If only they would listen to us all would be resolved. What we tend to forget is the practical implications of Jesus' life and death. "For to this you have been called, because Christ left

you an example, so that you might follow his steps (1 Peter 2:24)." May we be those who in the context of relationships appeal to others in love, not with veiled expectations and unspoken authority.

Philemon 10-14. ¹⁰ I appeal to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I became in my imprisonment. ¹¹ (Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful to you and to me.) ¹² I am sending him back to you, sending my very heart. ¹³ I would have been glad to keep him with me, in order that he might serve me on your behalf during my imprisonment for the gospel, ¹⁴ but I preferred to do nothing without your consent in order that your goodness might not be by compulsion but of your own accord.

THE APPEAL

Once Paul reveals that the nature of his appeal is on the basis of love, he then pours out his heart concerning Onesimus. Paul sees Onesimus as his child, the one whom he had begotten during the hour of his greatest need. Paul was awaiting trial in Rome and remained under constant guard in a kind of house arrest with a soldier always chained to him.² He was also responsible to meet his own expenses, and was free to receive visitors and preach the gospel.³ In this situation, Onesimus had proved he was useful and Paul vouches for him in this matter. While Philemon may have known a man who could not be trusted and proved himself useless, in Christ we find an entirely different man. Paul takes the time to reintroduce him to Philemon.

Again we see Paul's heart on full display. Sending Onesimus back in person was a costly decision. By sacrificing one who was near and dear to his heart to an uncertain future, Paul's only recourse was to trust God. He could have been sending Onesimus back to harsh punishment or even death. What was worse is the fact that there was no way to know since the length of this journey was over 1000 miles in each direction. It would take some time before he could hear a report back as to this uncertain reunion.

Not only was Onesimus a brother for whom Paul had a deep affection; he was also one who had proved himself useful in the ministry. This was especially needed as Paul had to provide for his own needs while under house arrest. As Paul lists all the reason why sending Onesimus back was a sacrifice, he focuses on Philemon. While many might have agreed that having Onesimus stay with Paul in Rome was the better solution then sending him back to Colossae, Paul had more in mind. For Paul, it was not about who could make the greater case about their needs, either personally

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or on the basis of their ministry. Paul defers to Philemon for his consent. In so doing, he provides Philemon the opportunity to put his faith into action. Paul's desire for Philemon is that he not be a reluctant participant in this matter, but an active partner.

APPLICATION:

How do we view our brothers and sisters in Christ? Are they more than a means to an end? It is a worldly mindset that seeks one's own interests. In true Christian fellowship, we find those with whom we have a kindred spirit, those who have a genuine about the welfare of others. Many seek their own interests, not those of Christ (Philippians 2:21). Let us not be like the world where we are so self-consumed with our own agendas that we see no one but ourselves. Let us be like Christ who takes a genuine interest in the lives of all men, especially those who belong to the family of believers (Galatians 6:10).

*Philemon 15-16.*¹⁵ For this perhaps is why he was parted from you for a while, that you might have him back forever,¹⁶ no longer as a bondservant but more than a bondservant, as a beloved brother—especially to me, but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord.

KNOWING GOD'S WILL?

The apostle Paul begins v15 with an interesting word, "perhaps." It seems that Paul is uncertain about how this will all end. He certainly is not speaking definitively about the outcome of Philemon's and Onesimus' interaction. What is clear in the mind of Paul is that Philemon is receiving much more than a slave. In welcoming Onesimus back into his home, he is gaining a beloved brother, a partner in the gospel, a co-heir in his kingdom of God. What he is gaining is someone whom Paul valued as a beloved brother and useful for his ministry. This was the gift that Paul was giving to Philemon. It was his sincere hope that Philemon, by faith, would understand this truth.

APPLICATION:

Sometimes we can speak so definitively about what God is trying to accomplish in our lives. Here, we must tread carefully. Even the apostle Paul was unclear about what God superintended in this situation. However, this much was certain. The circumstances they faced were God's will for their life, no matter the results. Let us trust that God is in control, even if we are uncertain of how things will ultimately work out.

Philemon 17, So if you consider me your partner, receive him as you would receive me.

ARE WE STILL PARTNERS?

Paul finally makes his appeal to Philemon. He has delayed raising the issue until now which shows a level of caution in approaching Philemon with this request. In his appeal, we find Paul asking Philemon to assess his partnership in terms of the gospel. Paul is asking Philemon if he still considers him a partner in the gospel. If so, will he accept his judgment in this matter? Paul was not looking to coerce his friend but hopes that grace will triumph in his heart, and that he will consider what was being requested.⁴ Here we find Paul seeking to help Philemon make the right decision. This type of relationship cannot be forced or mandated. When cultivated through Christ-centered interactions, it forms the basis of our Christian partnership and unity.

APPLICATION:

Developing partners of the gospel does not come easily. And yet we see this was the main thrust of Paul's ministry. He sought to establish relationships with others that were defined on the basis of the gospel, a point that for Paul was the foundation of their commitment. In these partnerships, he always thought long-term with a mind on how he could serve in the spiritual development of the other person. He understood that these relationships are forged on the basis of what Christ did for us on the cross. However, they only grow as we love, sacrifice, and seek other's interest above our own. In Christ, we are not only brought into communion with God but also community with His body. Who are your Gospel partners? If unsure, do not wait, now is the time to begin!

1 - The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon: Grand Rapids, Mich.; Eerdmans Publishing; Paternoster Press, 1996). 327.

2 - New Bible Dictionary, 3rd ed. (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1996). 963.

3 - Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary (Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 2003). 1330.

4 - Opening Up Colossians and Philemon (Leominster: Day One Publications, 2006). 114.