



CAPITOL COMMISSION™

How the Gospel Changes Lives: Philemon

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PHILEMON

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It would be interesting to look at some of today's leaders in our state government to find out what they were like when they were first year members of the West Virginia legislature. Our governor, senate president, and speaker of the house can all look back to their first year serving as lawmakers. I am sure that for each of them, no matter how overwhelming those first days might have been, there was a desire to ascend to greater positions of influence and leadership. Over the years they worked hard in order to become the leaders and achieve the positions they hold today. Doubtless, there are many serving in this year's large class of new legislators who also aspire to higher positions of leadership and influence.

Every one of us who claims to be a follower of Jesus Christ should also aspire to a high and lofty goal – to be like Him! The goal for the Christian is to be like Christ in our thoughts, attitudes, and actions. If we have truly understood how sinful we are; that God in His mercy and grace gave His own Son to die for our sin; and that through repentance and faith in Him we can have our sins completely forgiven, then how can we not desire to live for Him who has done so much for us? This desire to become more like Christ and better live for Him each day should certainly outweigh any earthly goals to which we might aspire. In the letter we are studying this session, Philemon demonstrates how the believer can grow and change in their Christian life.

The Bible describes the process through which believers become more like Christ as *sanctification*, a word meaning “to be made holy”. The word is actually used two ways in Scripture. *Definitive sanctification* refers to what Christ does for us at the time of our salvation. When we repent and trust Christ we are “made holy” (sanctified) in God's sight because Christ's holiness is given to us. We are delivered from the guilt and dominion of sin (Romans 6:22; 1 Cor. 1:30; Eph. 5:26; 2 Thes. 2:13). Every believer becomes a saint or “holy one” (Philemon 5). However believers will still continue to struggle with sin on a daily basis. Our goal is to get our character and actions to become more in line with the position we have in Christ. This is *progressive sanctification* and refers to our pursuit of holiness, or Christ-like character and actions (Romans 6:19; 1 Thes. 4:3-7).¹ This pursuit should take place in every area of our lives: the purity of our thoughts, our love for others, our highest goals and

priorities, even our interactions with colleagues and opponents here in the capitol. As believers we fail and sin in many ways each and every day. However we repent (see last week's study), and seek to move on to change and grow in that particular area. We see this process of sanctification demonstrated in Paul's letter to Philemon in all three characters. Let us see how it is clearly demonstrated in the life of Philemon.

PHILEMON'S NEED FOR SANCTIFICATION

As we read Paul's letter to Philemon, we find him described as a mature follower of Christ. Paul considered him a beloved fellow worker (vs. 1). The church in Colossae met in Philemon's home, and he was almost certainly one of the church's leaders (vs. 2). Paul writes of the love and faith he has toward Jesus and all the saints (vs. 5). Paul derived much joy and comfort from Philemon's faithful service to their fellow believers (vs. 7). Yet by virtue of the fact that Paul is writing this letter, Philemon still needed to grow in the area of forgiveness towards Onesimus.

This is just a reminder that no matter where we are in our Christian lives, each of us needs to change and grow in some (probably many) areas of life in order to become more like Christ. We cannot become satisfied or complacent in our Christian walk. As one writer said, “There is no place in authentic Christianity for stagnant, self-satisfied, and self-righteous Christians. Rather we should be seeking to grow in Christlikeness until we die”.² The area Philemon needed to work on was forgiveness. As we grow closer in our relationship with Christ, He will make us aware of areas where we need to change. As we see more clearly God's holiness and glory, we will become more aware of the areas of sin in our own lives. This is certainly an important lesson, but there is perhaps an even more vital truth to learn from Philemon about growing in Christ.

PERFORMANCE BASED VS. GOSPEL BASED SANCTIFICATION.

Paul could have commanded Philemon to forgive Onesimus and accept him back as a brother (Philemon 8). As an apostle, he had the spiritual authority to do so. Instead, Paul appealed to Philemon (vs.9) so that his right decision would not be by compulsion but rather of his own free will (vs. 14). Philemon's forgiveness of Onesimus was not to be done simply out of duty, but because of what had happened in both Philemon's and Onesimus' lives. Onesimus' life

BIBLE STUDIES

LOBBYIST / STAFF STUDY: **TUESDAYS, 12:00 NOON**, TREASURER'S CONFERENCE ROOM (EB 54)

LEGISLATOR / ELECTED OFFICIAL STUDIES: **THURSDAYS 8:00 A.M. & NOON** TREASURER'S CONFERENCE ROOM (EB 54)

West Virginia

How the Gospel Changes Lives: Philemon

had changed. He was useless but now he is useful (vs. 12). He is no longer a slave, but a brother, and should be treated as such (vs. 16). Paul even hints at Philemon's own salvation as the basis for which this forgiveness is to take place (vs. 19). Philemon's sanctification was to be based upon what Christ had done for them and who they were in Christ.

Very often we pursue our Christian growth out of compulsion, focusing on the things we ought to do and we forget or neglect the truth of the gospel. We are tempted to base our sanctification on our performance, the things we do to make sure we are acceptable to God. We may simply focus on the basics such as going to church and avoiding major sins. We may go a little deeper to include spiritual disciplines and involvement in ministry. We may even have a keen recognition of sin and a desire to overcome it. However, if we focus on our performance in these areas as the basis for pleasing God, rather than the gospel truth of what He has done for us in Christ, there will be little joy in our Christian lives and no real power to change. Instead, we need to focus on the gospel as the basis for our sanctification and growth in Christ.³ Jerry Bridges explained it this way:

Christians need to hear the gospel all of their lives because it is the gospel that continues to remind us that our day-to-day acceptance with the Father is not based on what we do for God but upon what Christ did for us in his sinless life and sin-bearing death. I began to see that we stand before God today as righteous as we ever will be, even in heaven, because he has clothed us with the righteousness of his Son. Therefore, I don't have to perform to be accepted by God. Now I am free to obey him and serve him because I am already accepted in Christ (see Rom. 8:1). My driving motivation now is not guilt but gratitude.

Certainly we are encouraged to work at our sanctification. But it is "dependant effort" or "grace-driven effort". We work and strive to be like Christ but we do so understanding who we already are because of Him and that it is only in His strength that we can become more like Him. The letter of Philemon demonstrates the gospel as the basis for change in our lives. It is we also find the tools God uses to help believers to grow.

THE TOOLS OF SANCTIFICATION

In Philemon we find the primary tools God uses to help believers change and grow. First is the Word of God. Paul was writing what

we now recognize to be the inspired Word of God. This letter was to be read to entire church (Philemon 2) as an encouragement for Philemon and whole church body to forgive Onesimus and receive him as a brother. All Scripture is profitable to help us grow in the faith (2 Timothy 3:16). That is why we need to read it, study it, meditate on it, and hear it preached regularly.

In Philemon the local church is also the tool God uses to help believers to grow and change. The letter was written to Philemon, Acchia, Archippus, and the rest of the believers in the church at Colossae. The church would have been the primary location for the preaching of God's Word. The mutual relationships fostered Christian growth. Philemon was a great encouragement to the believers there as they were most certainly an encouragement to him. In the public reading of this letter Philemon now had accountability before his brothers and sisters to respond to the message. Paul held a position of spiritual authority to which Philemon was obligated to submit. We should have this same kind of relationship with a good, Bible teaching local church. This doesn't mean simply attending but being a part, ministering to and being ministered to by others, and submitting ourselves to the authority of the pastors and elders (Heb. 13:17; 1 Thes. 5:12-13). Each of us should make sure we are finding this kind of teaching, encouragement, and accountability in a good local church.

- **LET US LEARN FROM THE LIFE OF PHILEMON HOW WE CAN GROW IN GRACE AND KNOWLEDGE OF OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST. ARE WE FOCUSING ON THE GOSPEL TRUTH OF WHAT CHRIST HAS DONE FOR US? ARE WE FAITHFULLY READING AND STUDYING GOD'S WORD? ARE WE INVOLVED IN A GOOD LOCAL CHURCH?**
- **WE UNDERSTAND THAT THE STATEHOUSE IS NOT A CHURCH. YET IS IMPORTANT TO FIND SPIRITUAL ENCOURAGEMENT FROM OTHER BELIEVERS IN THE CAPITOL DURING THE HECTIC DAYS OF THE REGULAR SESSION.**

¹ Which meaning of sanctification is intended in a particular passage is determined by the context. We have to read the passage to determine which meaning is used.

² Bridges, Jerry. *Gospel-Driven Sanctification*. Modern Reformation. May / June 2003. http://www.ouruf.org/d/cvt_sanctification.pdf. Parts of this study were adapted from this article.

³ Romans 6 is perhaps the clearest passage regarding this truth. I encourage you to read this chapter as you consider how the believer grows in their Christian life.