

Sunday, April 20, 2024 | Philemon: Brotherhood in Christ

Session 1 | Philemon 1-7 | "The Household of God"

Companies, to endear themselves to their employees, have been known to say something like, "We're not a corporation; we're a family," or, "Welcome to the [insert company name] family." And while that might sound like a good thing, such branding is often used to distract employees from the fact that they're likely being *played*. Staffers know that when their boss starts using familial language, they're probably about to get an increased workload without being sufficiently compensated. In fact, research has shown that when the line between work and home gets blurred, personnel are far more likely to be *exploited* for the benefit of the business.¹ And while there are dysfunctional families, a family generally doesn't manipulate its own.

This is because the fundamental difference between a corporation and a family is that the foundation of the former is *profit*, while the basis for the latter is *love*. A person on payroll will find their livelihood in jeopardy should they (accidentally or intentionally) jeopardize a company's profit margin. In contrast, the family is far more likely to forgive a person's shortcomings because, well, its members are *actually* family. For better or worse, they're related to one another, and that relationship creates a deeper and more robust bond than one based on money. A family is forged in *love* and has little to do with the *bottom line*.

Like a family but unlike a job, a church is a community defined by love. In fact, Christians will often use household terms like "brother" and "sister" to refer to their fellow believers. However, unlike a family, the DNA of a church includes not only love but also faith. Those within a church love one another precisely because they share a common faith in Jesus Christ. The Son of God, after all, is the one who saved believers and commanded them to love their fellow saints.

Thus, given that it is defined by faith and love, the church will be called to *radical* obedience, which *always* leads to *profound* acts of affection toward other believers. In trying to be faithful to Christ, we will learn to love like we've never loved before.

The Book of Philemon is a great example of how the bonds of faith and love can establish an everlasting brotherhood—i.e., The Household of God.

¹ Luna, Joshua A., "The Toxic Effects of Branding Your Workplace a "Family,"" October 27, 2021, *Harvard Business Review*, <https://hbr.org/2021/10/the-toxic-effects-of-branding-your-workplace-a-family>, [accessed, April 18, 2024].

Background:

- Written by Paul and Timothy. Given that Paul mentions being a "prisoner" twice (vs. 1, 9) and being "imprisoned" three times (vs. 10, 13, 23), he must have been incarcerated in either Ephesus or Rome.
- Written sometime between 55AD-62AD to a man called "Philemon" who lived somewhere in Asia Minor—e.g., Ephesus, Colossae. But, given the mention of other people's names—e.g., "Apphia," "Archippus," "and the church in your house,"—we can safely assume that Paul, *while speaking directly to Philemon*, also intended his letter to be read to the whole church. Thus, this is a *private* letter written with an *audience* in mind.
- Paul wrote to Philemon with two goals: first, he wanted Philemon to welcome Onesimus into the household of faith (vs. 17), and second, to return Onesimus so that he might minister to Paul on Philemon's behalf (vs. 13). Admittedly, this doesn't sound too interesting. Why even write a letter for such a thing? Because Philemon was a slave master and Onesimus was his slave (vs. 16).
- Now, to understand Philemon, we must talk about *slavery*. Admittedly, we will not exhaust this topic today, but at the very least, we must understand three things:

Firstly, the kind of slavery practiced in the first century is *not* the same thing as what was practiced in the US between the 17th and 19th centuries. The Civil War was fought to abolish what is called "**chattel slavery**," which is the permanent enslavement of a person, including their offspring. The kind of slavery practiced during the first century was "**indentured servitude**." Admittedly, this type of slavery could refer to the lifelong enslavement of a person, if they were a criminal or a prisoners of war. However, by and large, those who became indentured servants would be set free. In fact, most would be released by their thirtieth birthday.²

Secondly, unlike how slavery in the West led to the forced demoralization of an entire ethnic group, which led to oppression and abuse, across the Roman Empire, **many people from diverse backgrounds would willingly become indentured servants for the**

² Beale, G. K., *Colossians and Philemon*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, (Grand Rapids, MI; Baker Academic, 2019), p. 370

benefits.³ This is not to say there was no abuse; there was quite a bit. However, slaves in the first century, particularly those who took care of their master's household affairs—i.e., domestic slaves, as opposed to agricultural ones—would be educated and well-respected. Thus, being a slave was, in many ways, preferable to being set free. This was because the first century lacked any social or welfare programs. Otherwise, they'd be put into "a less secure position since protection and sustenance could no longer be expected."⁴

Lastly, while we must distinguish between first-century slavery and nineteenth-century slavery, we must also acknowledge that slavery, in any form, is abhorrent. This is because a belief that unites all forms of slavery throughout history is the idea that people are property. The famed philosopher Aristotle once explained that the slave is nothing more than "an animate article of property."⁵ In light of this, we might wonder why Paul did not explicitly command Philemon, a slave master, to free Onesimus, his slave? There are many good answers to that question. For instance, while slaves were commonly set free, they were always thought of as ex-slaves.⁶ As mentioned before, freeing Onesimus was not always preferable. But, ultimately, to ask of this little book to settle the issue of slavery is to miss a far more important lesson. Rather than try to unpack something like manumission or emancipation, Paul was concerned with reconciliation. Yes, he wanted master and slave to bury the hatchet, but more than that, he wanted brother and brother to be united once again the household of faith.

READ: Philemon 1-25 (ESV)

¹ Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, To Philemon our beloved fellow worker ² and Apphia our sister and Archippus our fellow soldier, and the church in your house: ³ Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

⁴ I thank my God always when I remember you in my prayers, ⁵ because I hear of your love and of the faith that you have toward the Lord Jesus and for all the saints, ⁶ and I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective for the full knowledge of every good thing that is in us for the sake of Christ. ⁷ For I have derived much joy and comfort

³ Beale (2019), p. 372.

⁴ Pao, David W., *Colossians & Philemon*, Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, (Grand Rapids, MI; Zondervan Academic, 2012), p. 350.

⁵ Pao (2012), p. 349.

⁶ Pao (2012), p. 340.

from your love, my brother, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you.

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— 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. 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.

¹⁷ So if you consider me your partner, receive him as you would receive me. ¹⁸ If he has wronged you at all, or owes you anything, charge that to my account. ¹⁹ I, Paul, write this with my own hand: I will repay it—to say nothing of your owing me even your own self. ²⁰ Yes, brother, I want some benefit from you in the Lord. Refresh my heart in Christ.

²¹ Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say. ²² At the same time, prepare a guest room for me, for I am hoping that through your prayers I will be graciously given to you.

²³ Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends greetings to you, ²⁴ and so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke, my fellow workers.

²⁵ The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.

In his greeting, Paul addresses three things:

i. Philemon's reputation.

Vs. 1-5 – “¹ Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, To Philemon our beloved fellow worker ² and Apphia our sister and Archippus our fellow soldier, and the church in your house: ³ Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. ⁴ I thank my God always when I remember you in my prayers, ⁵ because I hear of your love and of the faith that you have toward the Lord Jesus and for all the saints...”

In a handful of words, Paul employs quite a few household terms: “Timothy *our brother*,” “Philemon *our beloved fellow worker*,” “Apphia *our sister*,” “Archippus *our fellow soldier*,” “the church in *your house*,” and “God *our Father*.” He will address Philemon not as a “beloved fellow working,” but as a “brother” (vs. 7, 20). Finally, he will call Onesimus his “child” (vs. 10). Thus, everything he says in this letter is framed within the household of faith. In fact, Philemon is second only to the book of Galatians when it comes to kinship language.⁷ However, given its size, familial language takes up far more space in Philemon than in Galatians.

But what brought so many diverse people together? Paul says, “I hear of your **love** and of the **faith** that you have toward the Lord Jesus and for all the saints...” Though each person was unrelated by blood, they were united by “love” and “faith.” To be clear, both love and faith are expressed “toward the Lord Jesus and for all the saints.” This was a love/faith that was directed both upwards and outwards. It is the sort that Jesus was referring to when he said, “**You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets**” (Matt. 22:37-40).

A religion based only on a love for God leads to legalism, a theological framework that reduces faith to a set of rules. In contrast, a religion based only on a love for others leads to liberalism, a theological framework that reduces faith to a set of opinions. Christianity does not go to either extreme. Their love for God is expressed through their love for others but within the confines of a robust theological framework. This means some actions will be deemed acceptable and others will not. Because a Christian is within the household of faith, several household rules exist.

ii. Philemon’s **faith**.

Vs. 6 – “...and I pray that the sharing of your **faith** may become effective for the full knowledge of every good thing that is in us for the sake of Christ.”

Though Paul had just praised Philemon for his faith, he also prayed that his friend’s faith “**may become effective**.” In other words, it could become *ineffective*. This is particularly true later in the passage when Paul encourages Philemon to “**receive**” Onesimus as if he were Paul himself and “**no longer as a bondservant but more than a bondservant, as a beloved brother**.”

Should Philemon obey Paul’s request, his faith would “**become effective for the full knowledge of every good thing that is in us for the sake of Christ**.” In other words, by accepting Onesimus as a brother and not a bondservant, Philemon will gain a fuller “knowledge” of what is capable

⁷ Pao (2012), p. 374.

for those who do “every good thing...for the sake of Christ.” Those who are Christocentric in their dealings with others will do unusual “things.” In fact, those things may seem strange at first, but given enough time, those actions will prove themselves to be “good” works.

What Paul was requesting in this letter was not just unheard of in the ancient world; it was unthinkable. In a context outside the household of faith, for Paul to even suggest that a slave master ought to treat their slave as his equal, his own brother, would've been abhorrent. Slaves were property.

iii. Philemon's love.

Vs. 7 – “For I have derived much joy and comfort from your love, my brother, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you.”

Though Philemon's faith needed attention, his love was above reproach. Though doubtless Paul's request for Philemon to treat Onesimus as a brother will test that love, Philemon has already proven himself to be a man characterized by love. In fact, Philemon was so known for his love that it became the basis for Paul's request (vs. 9). Rather than command Philemon (cf. vs. 8), Paul appeals to Philemon's heart.

In fact, the Greek word for “heart” appears three times in this small letter: vs. 7, 12, 20. Thus, in the truest sense of the word, Paul's request is *heartfelt*. Philemon is known to refresh the hearts of the saints. Paul later says that in sending Onesimus back to Philemon, he is sending his “very heart.” And then, finally, he will implore Philemon, “Refresh my heart...” The implication is that if Philemon accepts Onesimus as a brother, Paul's heart will be refreshed.⁸

So, what's the takeaway?

Faith in Christ and **love for the saints** are the two pillars of Christian brotherhood.

READ: Galatians 3:27-28 (ESV)

²⁷ For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. ²⁸ There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

No one gets preferential treatment. All come by faith in Christ, or they do not come at all. And that experience changes the status quo. No longer are we defined by our ethnicity (“Jew nor Greek”), privilege (“slave or free”), or gender (“male and female”); our defining characteristic is

⁸ Pao (2012), p. 373.

our faith in Christ (cf. Col. 3:10-11). Christians do not divide, whereas non-Christians make it a habit of dividing. The church is a melting pot of people from various backgrounds.

READ: John 13:34-35 (ESV)

³⁴ A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. ³⁵ By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.

Jesus does not command that we love our neighbor as ourselves. Instead, he says to love others "just as I have loved you." The love of self falls short of the type of love that Jesus wants us to emulate. We are to love not how we want to be loved but how Christ loves. Only this radical new kind of love will demonstrate to the world that we are followers of Jesus.

But notice that these two pillars, faith in Christ and love for the saints, are diametrically opposed to Western notions of individualism and self-sufficiency. Gentlemen, to be an upstanding member of the household of faith, you need Christ and your fellow Christian brothers. You need community with God and the church community. Otherwise, you will risk your faith becoming "insufficient." Only within the walls of Christian brotherhood do men become what Christ would have them become.

EXAMPLE: The communal benefits of CrossFit.

If that is true for a gym, how much more so for our faith?

Video Description:

Philemon: Brotherhood in Christ | Session 1 | "The Household of God" (Philemon 1-7)

SPEAKER: Ben Hyrne, Pastor

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