

FOR LOVE'S SAKE I RATHER APPEAL

The book of Philemon is a very interesting letter written by Paul while he was in prison in Rome and sent to this dear brother Philemon who resided in Colossae. While in prison, he also wrote the letters to the churches in Ephesus and Colossae. Apparently all the letters were sent at the same time. Unlike Paul's other letters, this one does not deal with any church-related problems. Rather, Paul addressed a social issue, a domestic affair, involving Philemon and Onesimus.

We do not have the full story, but it appears that there was a slave named Onesimus who defrauded his master, Philemon. The slave fled Colossae and made his way to Rome. By God's divine hand, the slave met Paul while he was under house arrest in Rome. Through this contact, Onesimus must have been brought to the Lord and saved. He began to serve Paul in his imprisonment. A real brotherly love relationship was established, and Paul called Onesimus a beloved brother. The one who once served a master out of duty and bondage now served Paul out of a sincere love.

Under Roman law, slavery was an allowed institution, and Onesimus was still a slave under the law. Outwardly, he still may have been a slave; but praise God, inwardly he was a new creation in Christ, a brother in Christ. He had become a bond-slave to Christ and a fellow worker with Paul.

When faced with social evils in our day, some Christians (in name, at least) take up the physical sword (protests, violence) to combat the evil. Interestingly, Paul never attacked slavery, a social evil, in his letter but rather appealed based on a much higher law: **"Yet for love's sake I rather appeal to you"** (Philemon 9 NASB).

Love is confidence in Christ.

Paul knew Philemon's heart. He was a good brother, a beloved brother. The ekklesia in Colossae met in his house and his whole family served the Lord faithfully. Paul prayed for them, thanking God for their love and faith which they had toward the Lord Jesus and all the saints. What a tremendous commendation of this dear brother and his family. Paul was comforted by his love, knowing that the brethren in Colossae were refreshed through this brother. On the basis of knowing the faithfulness and love of this brother, Paul could say that he had confidence in Christ to order Philemon to release Onesimus and receive him back as a brother in Christ.

Why did Paul have confidence? Because he knew that Philemon was filled with the life of Christ. Paul knew that if he ordered Philemon to receive Onesimus, he would obey because the Christ in him would respond. He would do the righteous thing. Paul could say: **"Having confidence in your obedience, I write to you"** (Philemon 21 NASB).

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We find that Paul had the same heart towards the believers in Corinth, a church that had many problems, and yet he was confident in them because they were in Christ. In spite of great conflict, Paul could even rejoice and overflow with joy.

I do not speak to condemn you; for I have said before that you are in our hearts to die together and to live together. Great is my confidence in you, great is my boasting on your behalf; I am filled with comfort. I am overflowing with joy in all our affliction. ... I rejoice that in everything I have confidence in you. (2 Corinthians 7:3-4, 16 NASB)

What a heart we see in Paul. He did not condemn. He did not condemn the Corinthians nor did he condemn Philemon. Great was Paul's confidence in Christ that was in them. He fully trusted that the life of Christ in them would lead them to do what was right.

This is a lesson for all of the Lord's people, particularly for leaders who might be tempted to think that they must demand things of the brethren, that it is their right to make people do things. Christ was Paul's center, not the flesh of man. When we see love and faithfulness in a brother or sister, we respond to them in the same way of love, trusting that their heart will respond to the righteousness of Christ. May we experience the joy and peace of following such an example! When our center is Christ, all problems melt in His presence.

As disciples, do we seek to build up the Christ in one another? Do we seek after the Christ in one another? When we touch the life of Christ in another, do we trust that life, have confidence in that life? This is one lesson that Paul has given us.

For love's sake.

In Christ, Paul gives us a more excellent way. Paul showed the Corinthian believers the more excellent way (1 Corinthians 12:31-13:13; 14:1), which is love. Paul exercised this way with Philemon. "**For love's sake.**" Paul would tell us that we can have all the gifts operating in our lives, and yet if we do not have love, we are a noisy gong. If we do not have love, we are nothing. If we do not have love, it profits us nothing. The greatest gift is love. We are exhorted to pursue love.

It was on the basis of love that Paul could appeal to Philemon. Why? Because he knew that Philemon was a man who loved. Paul had heard of his love toward the saints. Paul had comfort in Philemon's love. It was on this basis that Paul could appeal in love. It was love responding to love.

Do we relate to our brothers and sisters in this way? Do we encourage the saints in love and serve as an example of love to all the brethren?

Disciples must be lovers—lovers of Christ and lovers of the brethren. We are commanded to love God and to love one another. Love is very practical. It covers a multitude of sins. It casts out all fear. It endures all things. It never fails.

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All that we do must be for the sake of love. After all, God is love! If we do not love then we do not know God (1 John 4:8). If we love, then God abides in us and we love one another (1 John 4:12). As we abide in God, His love is perfected in us.

Love is persuasive.

As an apostle, Paul had authority to order Philemon, but notice that Paul did not exercise this authority. On the basis of love, Paul appealed; he persuaded in love. Paul had the credentials to make an order. He was aged. He had the experience of being an apostle for many years. He had the marks of suffering for Christ. He was imprisoned. Paul could have told Philemon: "I am in prison for the sake of Christ. You must listen to me and follow my order. I have the authority." This was not the heart of Paul. Again, we see this heart in his relationship with the Corinthians.

For this reason I am writing these things while absent, in order that when present I may not use severity, in accordance with the authority which the Lord gave me, for building up and not for tearing down. (2 Corinthians 13:10 NASB)

Paul had authority given by the Lord. He could deal with things in a severe way if needed, but Paul saw this as the last resort. He wrote to the Corinthians to persuade them, to exhort them in love. His heart was to build them up and not to tear them down. Severity with a group or even one person can inflict great damage and tear down a person. In love, our goal must be to build up and never tear down.

Paul serves as an example to us, one which we need to follow, especially those in some role as a leader of the Lord's people. True spiritual leadership persuades a brother in love rather than uses a hammer of authority. True spiritual leadership is persuasive not lording; gentle not harsh; confident in Christ, not arrogant in the flesh; loving not hating; building up not tearing down.

Love restores.

Paul appealed to Philemon on behalf of Onesimus, who was like a child to him. He had begotten him in prison. He was formerly useless as a slave to Philemon, but, in Christ, he was now useful both to Philemon and Paul. Although Paul still had great need for this brother, he was sending him back to Philemon. He appealed to Philemon that he would receive Onesimus back, not as a slave but as a fellow brother in Christ. Paul was even willing to take all the wrong that Onesimus had done and put it to his account.

Paul's heart was to restore Onesimus back to Philemon even though it would be a loss for Paul. It was of more value to see a brother restored than to hold onto the brother for personal reasons. Again, this is the heart of love. Love desires to restore a brother or sister. It is willing to suffer personal loss now in order to gain in the coming kingdom. Paul could have kept silent about Onesimus. After all, slavery was wrong and Onesimus was now saved. But this was not enough. Full restoration

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was needed. Love demands this. Love does not rejoice in unrighteousness, but rejoices with the truth. Love demands forgiveness, and so we must!

Leadership must have a heart of love that seeks to restore brothers and sisters. As we go on in the Lord and meet for a period of time with the same saints, it is possible and, most likely, that conflicts will arise. What do we do? How do we resolve them? Do we hide them, ignore them?

In Philippians 4:2-3, Paul urged the saints to help two women, Euodia and Syntyche, to live in harmony. Evidently, there was some dispute between them that was causing some problems in the assembly. These women were good sisters who had shared in Paul's struggle for the gospel. There was need to help them through their personal struggle with one another. This is a vital lesson that we learn from Paul. Live in harmony. Love one another. Forgive one another. Do not hold accounts against one another. Settle the issues amongst us so that we can live in harmony.

What is the lesson we are to learn? Love restores! We have no record of Philemon's response, but we must believe that he obeyed Paul's request, and Onesimus was restored back to Philemon as a fellow brother in the Lord.

Love does even more.

Finally, Paul wrote Philemon that he knew he would do even more than what Paul said. In restoring a brother, it is not merely forgiving, settling the account, and moving on to something else. It is embracing the brother or sister back into fellowship and allowing the gifting in that brother or sister to begin operating. It is not holding the past over one's head but letting the past go. After all, is this not the very heart of our Lord? Through His death on the cross and the shedding of His blood, our past sins are blotted out, forgotten. God does not hold them over our head but fully forgives us, even to the point of not remembering them anymore. Love demands that we forgive and forget.

True leadership is when, in love, one fully restores brothers and sisters, and they begin to take up their gifted responsibilities in the house of God. This is the heart of our beloved Lord Jesus.

For love's sake, let us appeal!

Scripture Abbreviations:

NASB New American Standard Bible

Article: #23, July 2009

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