

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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Series:	Special Messages		Pastor/Teacher
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CHRISTIAN PERSUASION

1. The Epistle to Philemon is a beautiful example for us of genuine, heart-piercing persuasion between Christians. Each and every one of us would be wise to meditate on Paul's method and character here when we are anticipating conversations with fellow Christians about hard choices that will have to be made.¹ Whether that conversation is between spouses, parents and teenage children, or officers in the church, we all need to grow in the modesty, grace, and wisdom that Paul displays in this letter.
2. The Greeting - Verses 1-7
 - a. This is arguably Paul's most intimate, personal letter. He clearly knows these people he speaks of very well and approaches them in verses 1-3 as an equal rather than as their ecclesiastical superior.
 - i. Even the way Paul begins the letter, by calling himself a prisoner rather than an apostle of Christ Jesus, already gives the letter an exceptionally modest tone.
 - ii. The fact that Paul calls Archippus "our fellow soldier" likely means he is the pastor of this church that met in Philemon's home.² Colossians 4:17 corroborates this explanation, too.³
 - iii. This letter was most likely sent together with Paul's Epistle to the Colossians. Many of the same names are mentioned in both Philemon and Colossians 4, and even more importantly, Paul draws special attention to Onesimus returning with the Epistle to the Colossians.⁴
 - b. In verses 4-7 Paul speaks of his prayers for Philemon as a way of praising his godly character. This might seem like flattery to some, especially in this context where Paul clearly wants Philemon to do something specific. There are several key pieces of evidence, however, that prove this is not vain flattery at all.
 - i. First, this was Paul's habitual practice when writing letters. He almost never fails to mention that he gives thanks for his recipients in prayer, whether writing to

¹ "Paul's letter meets the case with such perfection that every line becomes precious to those who desire to emulate the apostle's spirit and the perfect way in which it reaches out toward another's heart. The whole letter is of pure gold." - R.C.H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul's Epistles to the Colossians, to the Thessalonians, to Timothy, to Titus, and to Philemon*, 952.

² Some have speculated that Archippus may have been Philemon's and Apphia's son, which would explain the ordering here. It also seems plausible to me, however, that Archippus is simply the pastor of the church which meets in Philemon's house. Since the letter directly concerns Philemon's household, it makes sense that Paul would greet them first, but since it was also to be read out loud to the whole church, he would want to include a greeting for the pastor and the church gathered there as well. Therefore it is not necessary for us to think Archippus was related to Philemon and Apphia.

³ "And say to Archippus, 'See that you fulfill the ministry that you have received in the Lord.'"

⁴ Note especially how Paul describes Onesimus in Colossians 4:9, as "our faithful and dear brother, who is one of you." This emphatic way of introducing him makes perfect sense given the background that Philemon illuminates for us. Paul wants to make sure that not just Philemon, but the whole church, will receive Onesimus back as their brother rather than a fugitive.

individuals⁵ or to whole churches.⁶ It no doubt had a powerful effect on those who received his letters, to know he was not just speaking well of them to their faces, but before God Almighty. There is much to learn from this about how sharing prayers binds the church together and builds unity in mutual love.⁷ It is a simple way to back up our words with real spiritual action.

- ii. Second, Paul has nothing personally to gain from what he is asking Philemon to do.⁸ As he reminds us at the beginning of the letter, he was in prison when he wrote this. In fact, he stands to lose both a dear companion who encouraged him as well as substantial money, as he will say later on in the letter.
- iii. Third, Paul is referring here to a mutual relationship, which Philemon will know is sincere. Coming from a stranger, this might well have been cynical flattery, but Paul has real knowledge about Philemon, such as his prior service to the saints.⁹ When Paul says he has “derived much joy and comfort from your love, my brother,” Philemon will know he means it, based on their established friendship.
- iv. It is a shame that many Christians feel so awkward about giving compliments or praying for one another in this manner. It is not flattery if it is sincere, without ulterior motives, and builds up credibility for those times when you need to tell that person something much more difficult, as Paul has to do here.

3. The Appeal - Verses 8-22

- a. Paul takes special care to note that although he *could* make demands and give commands here, he does not want to do that. It would be much better if Philemon recognized the truth of Paul’s words and voluntarily released Onesimus. Christians in any position of authority would do well to heed Paul’s example here and consider edifying persuasion as vastly superior to coercion where possible.¹⁰
 - i. This way gives Philemon the opportunity to more powerfully bear witness to Christ’s love in making a significant sacrifice for his slave, who is now his brother. This will stand out and impress slaves serving under pagan masters who are used to receiving no such generosity.
 - ii. If Paul ordered him to do it under threat of discipline, it would have no value for Philemon before the Lord. This way gives Philemon the opportunity to make a sort of free-will offering, releasing Onesimus to the Lord.¹¹

⁵ For example, 2 Timothy 1:3: “I thank God whom I serve, as did my ancestors, with a clear conscience, as I remember you constantly in my prayers night and day.”

⁶ You will find this in most of Paul’s letters, but consider 1 Corinthians 1:4-5 especially in light of the numerous scandals that church was plagued with: “I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that was given you in Christ Jesus, that in every way you were enriched in him in all speech and all knowledge - even as the testimony about Christ was confirmed among you - so that you are not lacking in any gift, as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ, who will sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

⁷ This is one reason why it is a very good idea for married couples to pray together, for example. If husbands and wives give thanks before the Lord for each other in this way, it will be extremely difficult to hold onto petty grudges and let roots of bitterness take hold of their hearts.

⁸ “For if others obtain the things which they ask, much more Paul. If coming before others, he was worthy to obtain, much more when he comes after others, and asks a thing not pertaining to himself, but in behalf of another.” - John Chrysostom, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, vol. XIII, pg. 550.

⁹ No doubt this includes, but is not limited to, the fact that the Colossian church met in Philemon’s house.

¹⁰ “By his example he shows that pastors should endeavor to draw disciples gently rather than to drag them by force; and indeed, when, by condescending to entreaty; he forgoes his right, this has far greater power to obtain his wish than if he issued a command.” - John Calvin, *Calvin’s Commentaries*, vol. XXI, pg. 353.

¹¹ Several commentators have noted the similarity of Paul’s appeal here in Philemon compared with the principle laid out in 2 Corinthians 9:7, “Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.”

- b. Notice again how earnest and intimate Paul’s language is as he speaks of Onesimus here, this runaway slave whom many in the Roman world would have considered deserving only of death.¹² If Philemon had any real love for Paul, it would be just about impossible to deny such a heartfelt wish.
- i. He speaks of Onesimus as his “child,” warmly reflecting on the basis of their relationship, the way he had led this man to faith in Christ. He furthermore calls him “my very heart,” directly tying Paul’s own wellbeing to Onesimus’s fate.¹³ Now Philemon must know that if he mistreats his slave, it would be a terrible wound for Paul himself, raising the stakes further.
 - ii. He speaks of hearts being refreshed twice in this letter, once in verse 7 and once again in verse 20. Both times, it refers to the love of Philemon imparting peace and relief to others. First to “the saints,” likely those Christians who met at the congregation in Philemon’s house, and second to Paul. If Philemon will receive Onesimus as his honored brother in Christ, the news of that reunion will in turn fill Paul’s soul with joy and gratitude for such a powerful display of Christian love in the Colossian church.
 - iii. Paul expresses that he loved Onesimus so dearly that he partly wished to keep him nearby for his continued companionship.¹⁴ This further highlights how much Paul valued Onesimus, and encourages Philemon to do likewise, especially in verse 11.¹⁵
 - iv. We should take from this that persuasion is *far* more powerful when it is based upon an established relationship with deep roots of love and trust. This is why Proverbs 27:6 says, “Faithful are the wounds of a friend.” A rebuke from a friend may hurt in the moment, but it has great power to persuade based on the faithfulness of that friendship.
- c. Paul leads by example, in the best sense he can from prison, when he offers to take part of the responsibility for Onesimus’s crimes on himself.
- i. We do not know exactly how Onesimus fled his master, or what he stole when he escaped, but Paul offers to write a blank check to pay for it. He even goes out of his way to say he wrote that offer with his own hand (as opposed to using a secretary, as he often did).¹⁶ He wants Philemon to know he is absolutely dead-set on this, even if it costs him personally.
 - ii. There is of course another valuable lesson in Christian persuasion here. Going out of your way to show you have “skin in the game,” as the saying goes, is a legitimate and very effective persuasion strategy. This is why when Peter exhorts the elders to lead well, he contrasts “domineering over those in your charge” with “being examples to the flock.” Remember that our Lord himself has entirely fulfilled his own Law. Therefore, to give orders from on high, as if you are above doing them yourself, is antithetical to Christ-like leadership.

¹² “The legal status of a slave was that of a ‘thing.’ Aristotle defined a slave as ‘living property’ (*Politics* 1.2.4-5, 1253b); ‘the slave is a living tool and the tool a lifeless slave’ (*Nicomachean Ethics* 8.11). Varro’s description is similar: slaves are ‘articulate instruments’ (*On Agriculture* 1.17.1). The slave had no legal rights and was subject to the absolute power of the master.” - Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*, pg 113.

¹³ “I am sending him back to you, sending my very heart.” - Philemon 12

¹⁴ “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,” - 13.

¹⁵ “Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful to you and to me.” - 11. Paul is likely referring here to the fact that a slave who wanted to run away was almost certainly not very productive anyway, so Philemon should be glad Onesimus will benefit him more as a willing brother than he did as an unwilling slave.

¹⁶ “If he has wronged you at all, or owes you anything, charge that to my account. I, Paul, write this with my own hand: I will repay it—to say nothing of your owing me even your own self.” - 18-19

- d. Many would have preferred if Paul gave some direct denouncement of the Roman practice of slavery in this section of the letter. Slavery did, of course, continue on in various forms for almost 2,000 years after Paul, even in largely Christian countries.
- i. In response, it is first of all important to point out that social reform was simply not the mission of the New Testament church. Paul and the other apostles were interested in following the Great Commission.¹⁷ They preached Christ crucified as the heart of the Gospel,¹⁸ and led Christians as witnesses to Christ in the unbelieving world.¹⁹ In their letters, they focused on addressing sins within the churches for the sake of strengthening this witness. You will not find, however, any real social criticism of specific issues in the New Testament, even though there was plenty to criticize on all sides.²⁰ That was simply not their aim.
 - ii. The critics of Paul on this issue also overlook that what we have observed regarding the power of voluntary persuasion may also apply on a much larger scale. Paul's teaching on the subject of slavery, while not at any time presented as direct social commentary, does *profoundly* undermine the foundations of the institution. He expounds in several different letters how the Gospel completely obliterates any distinctions between slaves and their masters in the spiritual realm.²¹ He also explicitly presents the incarnation of the Son of God as taking on the form of a *doulos* (the same Greek word used for Onesimus as a slave) and instructs all Christians to likewise take on this form, humbly serving one another in love.²² It can hardly be overstated how strange and counterintuitive this teaching would have appeared to Greeks and Romans at the time. Tom Holland (the historian, not the actor), has argued that Paul's teaching in these areas is comparable to a "depth charge," which is an indirect but devastating weapon when triggered.²³

¹⁷ "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age." - Matthew 28:18-20

¹⁸ "And I, when I came to you, brothers, did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified." - 1 Corinthians 2:1-2

¹⁹ "Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation." - 1 Peter 2:12

²⁰ For example, consider how the New Testament writers made use of the negative stigma attached to tax collectors at this time, but Christ *still* refused to comment on the rampant corruption present in that system when asked, in Mark 12:13-17, Matthew 22:15-22, and Luke 20:20-26. Clearly, Christians were well aware of the problems in Roman tax collection (known as tax farming) but were not supposed to dwell on it or let it affect their relationship to the state.

²¹ For example, "he who was called in the Lord as a bondservant is a freedman of the Lord. Likewise, he who was free when called is a bondservant of Christ. You were bought with a price; do not become bondservants of men." - 1 Corinthians 7:22-23. Or "For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. 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. And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise." - Galatians 3:27-29

²² "Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men."

²³ "In almost every way, [the classical world] is unspeakably cruel, to our way of thinking....

[Paul's portion of the New Testament] is not a very lengthy amount of writing, but compacted into this very, very small amount of writing was almost everything that explains the modern world.... Concepts like international law, for instance, concepts of human rights, all these kind of things—ultimately, they don't go back to Greek philosophers; they don't go back to Roman imperialism; they go back to Paul. His letters, I think, are, along with the four Gospels, the most influential, the most impactful, the most revolutionary writings that have emerged from the ancient world....

I think of [Paul] as a kind of depth charge deep beneath the foundations of the classical world. It's not anything that you particularly notice if you're in Corinth or Alexandria. And then you start feeling this rippling outwards. And by the time you get to the 11th century in Latin Christendom, everything has changed. I think, essentially, what Paul's significance is, is that he sets up ripple effects of revolution throughout Western history.... It spilled out so much, that now, in the 21st century, we don't even realize where these ripple effects are coming from. We just take them for granted." - Tom Holland, quoted in "We Take Christianity's Influence on the World for Granted," on *Stand to Reason*, str.org

iii. A substantial number of Christian preachers and theologians throughout church history have shown how biblical ideas are incompatible with slavery as it was commonly practiced. There has been broad agreement among the best Christian teachers that slavery is a sorry result of the Fall into sin, and not a natural institution by God like marriage is.

1. Gregory of Nyssa, one of the great defenders of the Nicene Creed we recite every other week, also gave the most searing condemnation of slavery in all of the ancient world.²⁴
2. John Calvin gave praise to God that, during his lifetime in Europe, slavery seemed to have almost completely vanished.²⁵ He had no way of knowing how it was being revamped and reinvigorated by the Portuguese at that time.

4. Conclusion - Redemption for the Glory of the Redeemer

a. The Epistle to Philemon has the least amount of explicit doctrinal teaching out of all of Paul's letters. As I have already mentioned, however, it was almost certainly sent as a companion piece to Colossians, so we should read these two letters together. When we do, it is not difficult to discover the doctrine behind Paul's request in Philemon.

- i. The most obvious bridgepoint between the teaching of the two letters is Colossians 4:1, "Masters, treat your bondservants justly and fairly, knowing that you also have a Master in heaven." Christian slave-owners were supposed to always bear in mind how they have been treated by God, who has infinitely greater cause to punish them severely for their sins.
- ii. Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, the Maker and Master of both the Old Creation and the New,²⁶ humbled himself and paid for the reconciliation of his creatures with his own body and blood. This, of course, includes both men and women, slaves and masters, from every tribe and nation on earth. Paul presents this Gospel so fully and so richly in Colossians, as he does in his other letters, that it necessarily fills believing hearts with joy and gratitude.²⁷ This is why Paul characterizes walking in the Christian life as "abounding in thanksgiving."²⁸

²⁴ "Tell me what sort of price you paid. What did you find in creation with a value corresponding to the nature of your purchase? What price did you put on rationality? For how many obols did you value the image of God? For how many coins did you sell this nature formed by God? God said: 'Let us make men in our own image and likeness' (Genesis 1:26). When we are talking about one who is in the image of God, who has dominion over the whole earth and who has been granted by God authority over everything on the earth, tell me, who is the seller and who the buyer? ... God would not make a slave of mankind. It was God who, through his own will, called us back to freedom when we were slaves of sin. If God does not enslave a free person, then who would consider their own authority higher than God's?" - Gregory of Nyssa, *Gregorii Nysseni Opera*, vol. 5, 336.6

²⁵ "...but they were slaves, of the kind that are still used in some countries, in that after a man was bought the latter would spend his entire life in subjection, to the extent that he might be treated most roughly and harshly: something which cannot be done amidst the humanity which we keep amongst ourselves. Now it is true that we must praise God for having banished such a very cruel brand of servitude." - Calvin, Sermon XLVI on 1 Timothy 6:1-2.

²⁶ "He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent." - Colossians 1:15-18

²⁷ "For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross. And you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him, if indeed you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed in all creation under heaven, and of which I, Paul, became a minister." - Colossians 1:19-23

²⁸ Colossians 2:7

- iii. In requesting Onesimus be forgiven for his escape and theft, Paul was demonstrating how Christians should show this gratitude in their earthly relationships with one another. When Paul offers to pay for whatever offenses Onesimus may have committed, he is living out an analogy for Christ's greater redemption, and implying Philemon should see this moment as a grand opportunity to do the same "in Christ."²⁹
- iv. This is why Paul's conclusion to Philemon is so fitting: "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit." He never threatens Philemon's assurance of salvation to get him to comply. Rather, he reminds Philemon that we all depend entirely on our Lord's grace for everlasting life, and therefore it is a privilege to display that kind of grace with our brothers and sisters.

²⁹ "Yes, brother, I want some benefit from you in the Lord. Refresh my heart in Christ. Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say." - Philemon 21