

Practical Proverbial, from Philemon, 16 Sep 19

Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, to Philemon, our dear friend and coworker, to Apphia our sister, to Archippus our fellow soldier, and to the church that meets in your house: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Philemon 1-3 (EHV).

We really should mind our own business. That's good advice that applies to all of us collectively and each of us individually. And it's advice we should always heed...but...

Greetings, my friend, and welcome back to your daily Proverbial. Today, we'll jump into Philemon, which is one of three books in the Bible that don't have chapters (the other books being Obadiah and Jude). They are so short that they are broken out only as verses. Yet in these short books, the authors (God and Paul, Obadiah and Jude, brother of Jesus) pack in ideas that we must consider today.

In Philemon, Paul wrote to a Christian friend (Philemon) on behalf of another friend, a man named Onesimus, who had wronged Philemon. Onesimus was Philemon's slave, and the former had fled the latter. Somewhere along his flight, Onesimus met Paul and Paul converted Onesimus into the faith. Paul then does an unusual thing: he tells Onesimus he must go back to his master, Philemon. Yet Paul also writes to Philemon, asking him to accept Onesimus not as a slave but as a fellow follower of Jesus.

Imagine the tension in all this. And imagine God's grace. Onesimus represents each of us, each person who must repent of his sins and face their consequences. And Philemon's forgiveness and acceptance of his former slave represents what God does for us through Jesus. And Paul represents a good friend. Good friends act in Godly ways to benefit all involved. Here, Paul served as a peacemaker, reconciling a wayward sinner with the one who he had sinned against.

Now imagine how you or I would feel if a 'butt-in-ski' like Paul butted into our business, asking us to forgive someone who had done us wrong. We should normally simply mind our own business...unless the circumstances are extraordinary. I don't know about you, but it's pretty extraordinary to ask a slave-master to accept his runaway slave now as a peer, an equal. Tell me: has anyone ever done that for you?

You know the answer. The man who did it died to make it happen. The grace He gave in return enabled us each to stand both before and beside Him now and in eternity. In fact, long before Paul did it, Jesus barged into our lives and offered to set things right because we couldn't even though we desperately needed to. Imagine that.

For further reading: Acts 16:1, Romans 1:7, Ephesians 3:1, Philippians 2:25, Philemon 4

Lord Jesus, thank You for the story of Philemon and Onesimus. Teach me again today to forgive as You forgive, to accept those who wrong me.

Practical Proverbial, from Philemon, 17 September 2019

I always thank my God as I remember you in my prayers. Philemon 4 (EHV).

Let's be real: this is a tall order. ALWAYS is an absolute word. "Remember" is something we don't consciously do enough. And "thank my God" is both intensely personal and intensely devoted at the same time.

Always thank God and remember others; do it even when it's tough. Thank God when things are good; thank God when things are bad. Just thank Him anyway, no matter where you find yourself, what kind of day you're having. Thank Him when your boss calls you to let you go. Thank God when your boss calls you to give you a promotion.

Thank God for people like my friend, Raymond, who pastors multiple congregations in Africa while also farming his homestead and teaching dozens of other young men and women to do the same. My friend is one of a kind but, come to think about it, so are you. So am I. There are more people like Raymond than there are the folks who skid to just get by. They live their lives for others to give glory to Jesus; thank God for them.

And thank God for people like my uncle, Buzz. My wife and I went to Buzz's funeral last week. What could have been a depressing day was made wonderful by seeing the hundreds of friends and family who gathered to memorialize him. They did that because Buzz was a Godly man who did his best and followed Jesus. I think more people 'saw Jesus' because of the kindly way Buzz lived than all the times he worked in formal ministries or led activities for the church. He left the world a better place than he found it because he lived his life in praise of Jesus. Thank God for men like him.

It can indeed be a tall order to thank God when life seems to just beat us down. But that's what Paul did for Philemon, who was faced a tall order himself. Philemon didn't have to forgive Onesimus; Philemon didn't have to free his slave. But Paul intervened for just that to happen. It happened because of the example Christ set for these men.

And that example is a tall order even in our world today. Our world, like Paul's, is set against the Lord. The world says we should let anger burn, get even, focus on Number One. This business of following this Jesus is foolishness, a waste of time, even wrong-headed.

Do it anyway. Thank God anyway. In the face of all the negativity, live thankfully. Thank God for the adversities, for the hurt, for the trials. Thank Him, have faith in Him, then get back up and get into your day.

For further reading: Romans 1:8, Colossians 1:3, 2 Thessalonians 1:3, Philemon 5

Lord God, I thank You for the trials that will come my way today. In all things good and otherwise, may Your Name be praised.

Practical Proverbial, from Philemon, 18 September 2019

...because I hear about your love and faith that you have toward the Lord Jesus and for all the saints. Philemon 5 (EHV).

Word gets around. If you let it, a single action can define you for years, maybe even a lifetime. That happens because people gossip, people talk, word gets around. If you think about it, all social media, from Facebook to Twitter to Instagram to even Pinterest, is subtle gossip. Social media is the latest way to spread the word, usually about ourselves (or things we favor). No, this isn't "Pick on Social Media Day." We'll save that for another time.

No, this is an acknowledgement that people talk. And sometimes what we talk about is constructive, or good, or helpful. It isn't much of a bet to bet that, when you or I die, we'll have wanted those around us to speak well of us. "She was such a great lady." "He was a good man who loved the Lord." "I'll miss him/her a lot because I loved him/her." You get the picture. Face it: people are going to talk whether we're here or not, whether we want them to or not.

Re-read today's verse and you see that Paul acknowledged this about Philemon. Word had spread from Colosse (his home) that Philemon was a strong follower of Jesus. He showed great love, caring, and compassion; he exhibited those Galatians 5 fruits of the Spirit. He demonstrated faith, something that can happen only if Jesus first inspires it into us; apart from Him, we can have no faith. That faith, those behaviors, this caring for Christ (and His reputation) and for those He loves speaks for itself. It makes itself known. Years ago, I spoke with a friend during an airplane ride and he told me, "when God blesses you, you have to share it. He blesses us with so much that we can't hold on to it. We have to pass it around."

Like my friend, Philemon shared that love of Jesus with his peers, his fellow followers of Jesus in Asia Minor. They cared for each other and cared for strangers. They got to 'be' Jesus to others when they let Jesus work through them. Because of that, word got around. It traveled from Asia through believers and messengers, through word of mouth, through letters. It reached an imprisoned apostle, who then shared it in a new way, requesting that this Philemon then share it again with a man who had once wronged him.

Putting the love of Jesus to work defined Philemon. And Paul. And my friend on the plane. And maybe us. Letting the love of God go to work in us is the thing that can define us for His good forever, starting now. It's something worth talking about. Wouldn't that be better than simply idle gossip?

For further reading: John 15:5, Galatians 5:22-23, Philemon 6

My Lord, work through me today. Let others see You in what I say and do.

Practical Proverbial, from Philemon, 19 September 2019

I pray that this fellowship of your faith may become active in understanding every good thing that belongs to us in Christ. Philemon 6 (EHV).

In verse 5, Paul writes of how he's heard good things about Philemon through the grapevine. Then, in verse 6, there seems to be a mild chastisement of Philemon, specifically in how Paul says, "your faith may become active in understanding."

Don't get hung up on that. Perhaps the best way to grasp it is to know that Paul's purpose in writing this letter was to ask Philemon to forgive – and free – Onesimus from the burden of slavery. Paul wrote to Philemon to ask him to take back Onesimus, a slave who had run away. Paul did this because Onesimus had come to faith in Jesus, had confided in Paul his status as a runaway slave belonging to a common friend. It's understandable that Philemon would be hesitant, even where fellow believers like Paul and Onesimus were concerned.

Knowing that, it makes sense that Paul would want to encourage Philemon to 'think outside the box.' Think about things you haven't thought about before (like forgiving a runaway slave). Think about forgiving someone who wronged you (like that runaway slave, whose very flight was a rebellion against you). Think about setting an example for other people in this nascent faith known as "Christianity" (because Christ forgave us first).

Think about that last statement most of all. Even Philemon needed to be reminded of that, especially when considering the fate of Onesimus. As a slaveowner, it would have been Philemon's right to have Onesimus beaten, maybe even killed; that wouldn't have been uncommon in first century Roman culture. Yet even more uncommon was this new faith system where "love your enemies" and "forgive as God forgave you" were the governing themes.

When Philemon put those into practice, he forgave Onesimus, freed him, and welcomed him home as a brother. It set a practical, powerful example for other believers of the time. Such a difficult but simple action as forgiveness showed that Philemon understood how the love of Jesus blesses us with every good thing, especially a warm and peaceful heart. Because Jesus forgave him first.

When we put those into practice, we do the same thing. We spread His love around to those who don't deserve it. We forgive those who wronged us so that they, too, might come to know God's peace. We put aside our anger and pray for those who are causing hurt so that they, too, might know how it feels to have mercy on another. In a time where 'thoughts and prayers' are disparaged by cynical skeptics, the simple act of sharing Christ's mercy allows love to conquer hatred and real peace to displace meaningless resistance. It's active in understanding.

For further reading: Luke 6:27, Ephesians 4:32, Philemon 7

Lord Jesus, forgive me so that I may forgive others. Inspire me today to find ways to share Your forgiveness and Your peace.

Practical Proverbial, from Philemon, 23 September 2019

For I have received great joy and encouragement from your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed by you, brother. Philemon 7 (EHV).

This concept of joy from refreshment of the soul is one Paul discussed in (at least) 3 books. In Romans, and both Corinthians books, Paul talks about joy and how refreshing to his spirit it is to know his fellow believers find joy in the Lord.

My uncle's funeral affirmed that for me. What could have been a morose, depressing ceremony turned into a celebration of joy because Uncle Buzz had used his life to live kindly towards others. Indeed, in this true story, he and his former son-in-law had been estranged. Buzz literally had a deathbed request to be reconciled and seek this man's forgiveness. Word came through Buzz's grandson that his father had indeed forgiven Buzz, and within minute of hearing this, my uncle died.

What a testament that is to the refreshing joy that comes from knowing we can receive forgiveness. That we can forgive because Christ first forgave us. Putting love into action can take many forms, from holding the door for strangers to being kind to telemarketers who call at dinnertime to letting mean words pass by when someone is attacking you. When faith is put into action, the fellowship of the saints is encouraged and grown.

Yet the most joyful, soul-refreshing way to put your faith in action is to forgive. Forgive your spouse when they say or do that bone-headed thing you hate most. Forgive the kids who bullied you in grade school. Forgive the guy who cuts you off in traffic. Forgive the one who broke your heart when they dumped you all those years ago. Forgive the gossipers who say petty things about you.

Forgive the way Jesus forgives – unconditionally and fully – and watch the hearts of the saints be refreshed.

Like our talk the other day, that's a tall order. It takes great inner strength to muster the fortitude to be kind, then to forgive. Everyone can do it, but most don't. But if you want to experience being part of heaven right now (instead of just later) then forgive generously, forgive without strings, and forgive again and again. As Olivia Newton-John sang, let go to let God.

The crazy thing is that, when we let go of our burdens and accept the forgiveness God gives in Jesus, we experience joy. It is like cold water after a hard day of work. Or shade on a sunny day. If you haven't done it, why not let go of your baggage today and experience the joy that comes from understanding you're truly, permanently forgiven?

For further reading: Romans 15:32, 1 Corinthians 16:18, 2 Corinthians 7:4, Ephesians 4:32, Philemon 8

Lord Jesus, forgive me. I've sinned against You. I need Your forgiveness; I want Your joy.

Practical Proverbial, from Philemon, 25 September 2019

Therefore, although in Christ I could be bold and order you to do what you ought to do, yet I prefer to appeal to you on the basis of love. It is as none other than Paul—an old man and now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus—that I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, who became my son while I was in chains. Philemon 8-10 (EHV).

Was Paul easily swayed, impressionable because he was enduring a vulnerable time?

You know how it goes. You're under pressure, under stress. During that time, people come to you for things that you might not otherwise consider during other less-tense times. If you're like me, you're likely to simply agree, acquiesce to what they're asking or wanting. Did that happen to Paul?

After all, Paul was being persecuted in Rome. He was literally in chains, living as a house prisoner of the Emperor Nero. Paul knew this would likely end up in his death; the writing was on the wall. It would be understandable to assume that he was under mental duress, under stress, when he met Onesimus. Onesimus may have been (probably was) earnest in presenting his faith, and this impressed Paul who saw the young man's faith as genuine. In fact, it was so genuine that Paul refers to Onesimus as "my son:" something that wouldn't have been said lightly.

So, was Paul easily swayed and impressionable? Answer: probably not. Since that is so, it then seems likely that the faith both men were sharing was real and vital. That Paul genuinely understood the depth to which Onesimus was committed to Jesus Christ. It was real, it was honest, it was forthright.

Have you ever had someone vouch for you like that?

There was nothing in it for Paul. Philemon's forgiveness of Onesimus wouldn't free Paul from Roman imprisonment. There was nothing monetary or physical or tangible to be gained. It wouldn't even build up Paul's reputation to meddle in the private affairs of another believer.

Yet Paul did it anyway. He vouched for the earnest faith of his friend – his 'son' – Onesimus to the one man who could either free him or sentence him to death.

Again, have you ever had someone vouch for you like that? Has someone, with nothing to gain for themselves, ever vouchsafed your reputation to help you in a way that would change your life forever?

For further reading: Philemon 11

Lord, I praise You for men like Paul, who would go to bat for others. And I praise You for the kind of faith that would inspire them to do it.

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Practical Proverbial, from Philemon, 26 September 2019

Formerly he was useless to you, but now he has become useful both to you and to me. Philemon 11 (EHV).

Slavery is useless. Paul just said so.

In his life as a slave, Onesimus had been useless to Philemon. Whether this is in the context of the work he performed, Onesimus' attitude toward his master, or even Philemon's use of Onesimus as a slave we don't know; that context isn't provided. What we do know is that Paul calls it out and says that Onesimus, as a slave, was useless to Philemon.

Ditto your job. Ditto your house. Ditto your marriage, your kids, your pride, your everything. EVERYTHING that we value here on the Third Rock it serves following Jesus Christ.

That's a bitter pill for me to swallow. It wasn't always so, but these days my family is my most important earthy matter. Years went by before I realized that my children and grand-children are the legacy I will leave behind. We never truly own anything since God places our things on loan to us. When we die, others get them. I won't live here forever; someday I'll be gone and the only physical reminder of me will be a stone in a Dallas cemetery. Yet I'm going to live forever because Jesus is my savior. What's more, I'm going to live on here in the memories, habits, and lives of my kids, grandkids, and whoever they meet.

That's going to happen because God opened my eyes and revealed that everything else is useless compared to Him. It took years of sin and more years of repentance for me to realize what He was telling me. As Jesus said in Mark 8, what good is it to gain everything but lose my soul in the process? He revealed to me (in a hundred different ways) that the real inheritance I can leave to my kids & grandkids is Christ Himself. Inspiring them to follow Him. Inspiring them to live lives in service to Him through living out the behaviors described in Galatians 5. Inspiring them to act in ways that point others to Christ through kindness, understanding, patience, and Godly wisdom. Love, joy, peace, patience and the rest: those behaviors that spring from following Jesus are the inheritance He wants us to leave for those after us. So that they can learn to follow Him too.

Everything else is meaningless; everything else is useless. Every possession, every person, every thought, every dollar here is useless if it isn't in service and acknowledgement of Christ the King. In many fewer words, that's the message Paul sent to Philemon.

For further reading: Ecclesiastes 1:1-11, Mark 8:36, Galatians 5:22-23, Philemon 12

My Lord, may all my thoughts, words, and actions be only in service to You. May others see You through how I live today.

Practical Proverbial, from Philemon, 30 September 2019

I am sending him—who is my very heart—back to you. Philemon 12 (EHV).

My barber is retiring. I'm (selfishly) sad because it took a long time to find a barber whose haircutting skills I like. Yet I'm also happy for him because he's almost 64 and has worked hard for over 40 years in our small north Texas town to amass the necessary retirement savings. He's earned a happy sunset.

More than that, I'm even happier because he's taking Jesus with him. When I was at his shop last week, another customer asked him what he was going to do when he retires to his new hacienda in Guadalajara. "Hand out those Bibles for Jesus," he said in response, pointing to a large box of Spanish-language Bibles sitting in his shop. This is a man who did a tour in the Army, then has worked as a barber for most of 40 years. He worked a few in Denton (west of here) but worked most of the time in a small barber shop he built here in Celina. Through it, he says he has journeyed in the Lord, that Christ brought him out of his own struggles, that Jesus has bathed him in mercy.

Now this Jesus is sending him, who is His very heart, to a new place. In 2019, retirement is supposed to be a time of relaxation, non-stop recreation, and reward from a lifetime of work. I barely know my barber-friend, whose name is also David, but I suspect he has a retirement full of work ahead of him. Indeed, when the Son of Man comes into your life, He rarely lets you stay idle. There is always something He has for you to do, and it's always spiritually enriching and personally challenging.

Paul sent Onesimus the slave, who Paul cared for like a son, back to his master, Philemon. In doing so, he said "go" to Onesimus, with that going being an adventure in Jesus. At that time, nobody knew whether Onesimus would face punishment, even death, on his return home. Come what may, Paul sent 'his son' off in faith to the master he had wronged (by fleeing). So Paul wrote this letter to hopefully smooth over the conflict and ask that the master to welcome his (now) former slave as a fellow believer in Christ. In a way, it wasn't Paul but Jesus asking Onesimus to go, and go home the man did. In doing so, he trusted his fate to Christ.

Just like my friend, David, is doing. David the barber hasn't been a slave, but he has worked hard. He's earned that retirement in a beautiful Mexican hacienda. Yet I think he knows that it is adventure, and not relaxation, that's ahead of him now. And that's the better future.

For further reading: Philemon 13

Lord, grant my friend a safe, adventurous retirement future. Guide me in my own adventures for You today.

Practical Proverbial, from Philemon, 1 October 2019

I would have liked to keep him with me so that he could take your place in helping me while I am in chains for the gospel. Philemon 13 (EHV).

Have you considered that you have a responsibility to help others who are in trouble? Seriously. This isn't a guilt-thing; I'm not writing this to guilt-motivate you. No, you have a duty, a responsibility, a commitment (whether you know it or not) to help other people who are suffering. It's your job; it's your burden; it's your pleasure. Those other people: even if you don't know you have a responsibility to help someone, they know. They know if you don't.

But don't lose sight of something said in that last paragraph: it's your pleasure. Helping someone else doesn't have to be a toilsome thing. It's only our perspective that would make it seem as if this would be a burden.

Indeed, Paul knew he needed help. In ancient Roman prisons, you were on your own. You were bound in prison only if you were potentially guilty of a high crime because Roman justice for all other crimes, even capital crimes, was usually swift. I learned (from a Calvary Chapel podcast) that Roman justice usually involved the verdicts of not guilty or guilty, and if you were guilty you were either fined, enslaved, banished, or executed. There were very few long-term prison sentences allowed. Paul was in prison awaiting his appeal to Rome (as a Roman citizen) for the false charges levied against him by the Jews.

While in confinement, he needed help. Roman prisons – even house arrest – provided no food, medical care, clothing, or even things to sleep on. If someone didn't provide for you, you went without or quickly died. Paul would have died as his confinement lasted for months had people like Onesimus, Philemon's escaped slave, not cared for him.

Tell me: is there someone in your orbit who needs help that you can provide? Yes, we can (and should) help strangers we meet on the street. You judge by your own conscience how much God tells you to help them. Yet most of us also have other people in our lives who need our help, either actively or passively. Some people we can help; others are best left to prayer. But we should help wherever we can, whenever we can. The couple who's divorcing; the lonely kid in the lunchroom; the lost friend who needs your friendship: we could go on forever.

And that's the key: to go on forever. God wants us to go on with him forever, and He sends us each other to help that process along here. It's our responsibility to do our best with it, to help others in need, to follow where Jesus is leading and happily so.

For further reading: Acts 21:33, Philemon 14

Lord, show me today where I can help someone!

Practical Proverbial, from Philemon, 2 October 2019

But I did not want to do anything without your consent, so that any favor you do would not seem forced but would be voluntary. Philemon 14 (EHV).

Are you willing to give, to forgive; are you willing to share? My two-year-old granddaughter is living with us at the moment and she's a lesson in sharing. She hasn't had much exposure to other little kids, so seeing her share – or not – up close and personal with my other two-year-old granddaughter is eye-opening. Picture it: two-year-old's, "mine", "NO", alligator tears, hurt feelings, grandpa hugs, giving the toy (or whatever it is) to the other child, more tears, and so on.

Two-year-old children lack the intellectual ability to thoughtfully consider their actions. They also lack the ability to know what consent is, or why it's important when wanting to get or use something that someone else has. And they don't know how to express themselves unselfishly in all cases, or how to show willingness to do something that violates their sense of needing, wanting, or personal space. Fair enough.

So what's our excuse? My way or the highway. Unwillingness to let go of a grudge. "Just go ahead and do it." It's easier to ask for forgiveness than permission: what's our excuse for doing things without another's consent so that their favor will be voluntary and not compelled? How do we justify not forgiving?

Paul was ASKING Philemon to accept Onesimus as a brother, not as property. Paul didn't demand it; didn't say "he's coming back" without reason or explanation. He didn't compel Philemon to accept something that was unacceptable or forced on him. No, Paul asked his friend to accept that his former slave was now a strong believer in Jesus. As we've discussed before, that would have been a highly unusual thing. It would be for us in our so-called modern world as well.

Don't believe me? Try forgiving your ex. Most breakups and divorces involve animosity. Imagine if you were trying to split up your house and your soon-to-be ex got sick and needed your help. Would you invite them back and share your space even though they so seriously wronged you? Would you pray for their forgiveness, pray that they would know Jesus' grace and peace? Some friends recently shared that they knew the BTK killer and several of his victims' families. They shared how the families forgive this man who ruthlessly murdered their loved ones.

Imagine sharing that. Imagine consenting to invite someone into Jesus Christ's forgiveness so that they, too, might live in His grace forever even as they have done the most heinous things we can conceive. Two-year-old's can't (and won't) share like that, but God's forgiveness should always be the standard by which we evaluate what we and they share. What's our excuse today?

For further reading: 2 Corinthians 9:7, 1 Peter 5:2, Philemon 15

Lord Jesus, help me to put aside my pettiness and share Your grace with others, today and always.

Practical Proverbial, from Philemon, 3 October 2019

Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back forever— no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother. He is very dear to me but even dearer to you, both as a fellow man and as a brother in the Lord. Philemon 15-16 (EHV).

These verses are reasoned speculation, but they're the crux of the whole book. "Maybe this is happening so that Jesus might increase." "Perhaps this has happened because God ordained it." "It could be that this took place so that you might see him in a different light, as Jesus does."

Perhaps that's why you're here today.

Perhaps you're who you are, where you are, as preparation for today, for what's coming. Good and bad, things have happened in your life that led you to today, to right now. There are people in your life today, there are things you're doing or will do, there are thoughts you have to share: perhaps what has happened in your life so far has been God preparing you for right this moment at hand.

What will you do with what God has given you?

Don't be guilted by that. Don't be scared of it. Don't be shy or hesitant or insecure or angry about it. God has made you uniquely. There's only one you; you are one of a kind, and you are very good because God made you to be just you. He made you to share. He made you to forgive.

Yesterday, in a Dallas courtroom, a young man whose brother had been senselessly murdered, forgave his brother's murderer and shared the love of Jesus with her, openly, gracefully, publicly, completely. It was an extraordinary thing to behold, and a hopeful moment for our world. He, who didn't have to, gave of himself the gift of Jesus to a woman, who didn't deserve it, who will spend a long time in prison contemplating it.

Perhaps that young man's biggest moment just happened. Perhaps God made him for such a time as that. Perhaps God ordered the events of their lives for the very purpose of sharing the good news of Jesus Christ in the way he did. Perhaps there are many more great things to come for the young Mr. Jean. Grace is a wonderful thing, perhaps the most powerful force in the universe.

Yes, this is all just reasoned speculation, but faith in Jesus is the foundation of all reason, and the love of Jesus makes all reason possible. We saw the beautiful thing Botham Jean's family did with God's grace. What will you do with it today?

For further reading: Genesis 1:31, Esther 4:14, 2 Corinthians 8:23, Philemon 17

Lord Jesus, You have ordained the days of my life for the work of Your Kingdom. Equip me today to share You with others in my life.

Practical Proverbial, from Philemon 7 October 2019

So if you consider me a partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. Philemon 17 (EHV).

Here, in verse 17, Paul makes his most blunt, reasoned, and faith-filled personal appeal yet. “If this, then that.” He bluntly asks Philemon to treat his escaped slave the same as he would the most famous apostle in the faith. “If you believe as I do, then do me this honor.” “If your faith means to you what mine means to me, then forgive him.” Having made groundwork arguments for why this should be done, Paul confidently asks what’s on his heart.

In welcoming Paul, Philemon would be welcoming both Onesimus AND Jesus. Logically, that’s a stretch; it may even be a logical fallacy because C does not necessarily equal A if A equals B. Yet, as a matter of practical faith, it IS true. When Jesus lives through us, others see Him when they see us. When we think, say, and do God-pleasing things, we are sharing Jesus, people are receiving Jesus, Jesus is being advanced, Jesus is at work. Paul knows this; so did Philemon.

It was true then; it’s true now. And it’s the best reason we can give to another person as to why they should do something for us. It’s making the ‘Jesus argument.’

Paul wouldn’t have done this lightly. He had received this famous introduction from Jesus, one on one, in the middle of the Syrian desert. It shook Paul to his core, and it became the starting point on his faith journey that saw so many new churches planted. Paul was known for his serious approach to matters of faith; it was a very real thing. The epistles he wrote that are left for us testify to this. This was a serious matter, one in which Paul put his friendship with Philemon on the line.

Perhaps you’re being called to do that today in your life. Is there a relationship in your life that is suffering, or needs God’s help (hint: they all do)? Is there something bothering you that you need to talk about? Is there a favor that you need to ask but you need Jesus’ strength, peace, and help to get it done? In Christ all things are possible.

Bridge the gap; mend your fences; make the move. Let go of the grudge and let God. Be the peacemaker when peace has broken down. If there is a relationship in your life that matters and there’s something about it that you need to address, then do it today. First go to God and ask for His help, then go to the other person and say the words. Do it in love; do it in respect; do it in faith and submission to the other person. Do what Paul did.

For further reading: Matthew 19:26, 2 Corinthians 8:23, Philemon 18

Lord Jesus, I need Your help today in my life in dealing with this relationship. Help me today.

Practical Proverbial, from Philemon, 8 October 2019

If he has done you any wrong or owes you anything, charge it to me. Philemon 18 (EHV).

Imagine going out of your way to take on the penalty for someone else's wrongdoing. That's the practical basis of Christianity; we know this.

Now imagine going to a store (like Tyler Perry did) and paying off someone's layaway debts. Imagine getting your neighbor's credit card statement, then calling their company to pay them off. Imagine standing in front of a sentencing judge and saying "I'll go to prison instead of the convicted." Imagine standing in the Ypres trenches in 1915 and telling your fellow soldier, "you stay here when we storm the other trenches. I'll go instead of you."

Imagine being the Apostle Paul, writing to a slaveholder named Philemon, whose slave was returning to him. Imagine Paul saying "whatever he owes you, charge me and I'll pay." Or, "whatever punishment you (rightfully) want to inflict on him, inflict on me instead." Imagine thinking that through, then saying it anyway.

Just like Jesus.

Because that's what Paul is saying here. In a way, he's doubling down on his request for Philemon to accept Onesimus as an equal in Christian faith. Paul is putting muscle behind that request. Yet then Paul makes the extraordinary statement guaranteeing Onesimus' return and making himself vouchsafe for it. It's like Jacob sending one of his sons to Egypt (at his other unknown son, Joseph's, request). It's like George Bailey putting up his own money as makeshift collateral during the bank run. It's like Jesus stepping in at the moment you're judged for your sins and saying "not guilty. I paid the price."

Imagine that.

Can you imagine yourself doing something like that? To be honest, I can't. I probably wouldn't do it; I'm selfish. There are many excuses, even reasons, I can give you why I wouldn't do this. But they typically boil down to my personal selfishness. Kudos to you if you can say differently because you're more like Paul & Jesus.

Yet Paul is calling Philemon (and you and me) to actually be more like Jesus. He is calling us to be willing to do whatever we have to do to ensure someone else's well-being. It'll likely be uncomfortable; it will probably cost us dearly; it may even take our lives.

Paul is saying, "I'll do it anyway." Just like Jesus did.

Today, when you can help someone else by showing them a little grace, do it anyway. Do it to help them because they can't help themselves. Do it for Jesus' sake.

For further reading: Genesis 43:9, Philemon 19

Lord Jesus, graceful Savior, help me to do this anyway, to serve someone else by assuming their burdens today.

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Practical Proverbial, from Philemon, 9 October 2010.

I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand. I will pay it back—not to mention that you owe me your very self. Philemon 19 (EHV).

“I’m writing this in my own hand” is a strange thing to say in a friendly letter, but Paul says it anyway. It was a way of personally verifying that the letter was, in fact, written by him. If you think about it, in the first century, there probably wouldn’t have been any other way to say or do something, publicly and in writing, that would verify in such a way. Paul often dictated his letters, but on this, most likely because he was asking such an unusual thing, he wanted personal authenticity.

Yet the most amazing thing about this verse is the second sentence. “You owe me your very self” is a massive boast. Most likely it goes back to when Philemon became a believer. Biblehub reminds us that Philemon was a wealthy man whereas Paul was the person in need. Yet in this extraordinary book it is Paul who assumes the upper hand, doing so on moral and spiritual (rather than financial) grounds. It makes sense, then, since Paul was the person who first brought the world of Christ to Philemon, Paul would make such a claim as “you owe me your life.”

I suppose that desperate times call for desperate measures.

Can you make that boast to anyone? Are you the Apostle Paul to someone’s spiritual Philemon? People are always saying that we don’t always know the effect we have on other people. We should live out our lives genuinely, not in two-faced or double-minded ways, so that people see Christ when they see us. A friend of mine said (of his seminary years) that he and his fellow students often held second jobs when they were putting themselves through seminary. Many of them worked in construction and blue collar trades. One of his professors reminded them that they should live their lives in their second jobs so as to not make it difficult to believe they were studying to be pastors in their primary jobs. Walk the walk and talk the talk because others are watching.

If we’re believers, it should show because what we say and do affects others. We may just be the one person in someone’s life who brings them to Christ, who shares Jesus in such a way that it’s life-changing for them. For me, that person was my uncle. And my pastor-friend that I mentioned above (any of my pastor friends, actually). And my aunt, who reminded me in a dark time, to keep faith and keep writing these blogs. I owe them my very life, both in the spiritual and even physical senses. I was once desperate too even when I didn’t know it.

For further reading: 1 Corinthians 16:21, Philemon 20

Lord Jesus, teach me again today to live in ways that show off my faith in You. Others are watching.

Practical Proverbial, from Philemon, 15 October 2019

I do wish, brother, that I may have 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 ask. Philemon 20-21. (EHV).

Let's get it out there: Paul is NOT asking for money. In the era of Clintonesque wording, it's understandable that some would say "refresh my heart" would mean "send me money." But Paul wasn't a shakedown artist. He was an apostle of Jesus, asking a deep favor from a good friend and fellow devout believer.

So, instead of cynicism, how about we consider being refreshed in the Lord? I'll admit: that's a tall order for me today. I'm tired after a wonderfully busy wedding weekend trip to Virginia. But it left me physically tired; oh, and I caught a cold. As I write this, I'm battling the cough and my urge to catch a few zzz's. Some refreshment would be wonderful, preferably NOT from the 'fruit of the vine.'

Knowing that, it's a beautiful thing to consider the faith of others, to consider how our prayers, thoughts and actions can build up others. It's even more beautiful to consider how others' prayers, thoughts and actions build us up. My wife and I left last Wednesday and drove all night to Asheville, NC. We toured the Biltmore, then stayed the night and drove into Richmond the next day. There, we met family, attended the rehearsal party and joined in the fray. Saturday was the wedding and it was a GREAT time! We got back to the house about 11 PM, got a few hours of sleep, and then hit the road at 0500 on Sunday. That day, we drove to Indiana to do a quick visit with family there, to pick up some wine at a local winery, and then headed home. Exhausting? You bet.

But it's AMAZING when I consider how none of it was possible without God's favor refreshing our attitudes, clearing the roads, preventing calamities, and keeping us safe. None of this quick, fantastic trip could have happened if God hadn't refreshed us with His constant presence, His constant protection from the evil one and his forces of chaos that are always on the attack. It's amazing to consider that there were friends and even strangers in other places praying for us, praying that we would enjoy ourselves and make it home safe.

Which we did. Because we were refreshed and made anew by Jesus. Ailing, tired, or not, THAT matters more.

Today, when you're going through your busy day, take a few minutes to consider how the prayers, love, and words of others refresh you. And then pray a prayer of thanks to God for making it all happen.

For further reading: 1 Corinthians 16:18, 2 Corinthians 2:3, Philemon 22.

Thank You, Lord, for refreshing my spirit through this life You gave me. Thank You for the prayers and love of the people around me.

Practical Proverbial, from Philemon, 16 October 2019

And one thing more: Prepare a guest room for me, because I hope to be restored to you in answer to your prayers. Philemon 22 (EHV).

Audacious and bold: is it audacious and bold for Paul to ask his friend, Philemon, to free his slave, then to ask for room and board? Would you do it? Would I? Should we?

Fact is, Jesus ALWAYS calls us to be bold in Him. Apart from Him, we can do nothing. We can't breathe. We can't plan for success. We can't feed ourselves, or fight off evil, or even get up in the morning. Apart from Jesus, we are utterly lost in every way imaginable.

Yet in Him, everything is possible. Those things we can't do: they're possible. Those things we can only dream of doing? Possible. Those things that seem impossible? Completely possible, completely plausible, completely within our grasp.

The key is faith. Ask in faith and He will grant what we need, which is always best. What's more, we should be bold, be audacious, in our faith. We should boldly ask God for what matters most to us. Boil away the dross of the world and most people will find that what matters most isn't worldly, isn't physical, isn't material. The things that matter most are the matters of the heart, where faith moves us. When we ask Him for those things from our heart, He answers.

It mattered greatly to Paul that he be able to travel to see his fellow believers, one of whom was Philemon. Paul earnestly hoped to be free from Roman imprisonment so he could return to Asia Minor to see the churches where he had served. After boldly asking Philemon to forgive Onesimus the escaped slave, Paul, then, boldly asks Philemon to also open his home. It wasn't just Paul's desire: from the verse, it was apparently also Philemon's. So Paul 'calls' him on it, asking him to grant this additional blessing of personally sharing hospitality.

Bold? You bet. Yet it mattered because Paul was asking this in faith, not just for himself but for the spiritual enrichment of Philemon as well. He had asked for the freedom of Onesimus not just for Onesimus, but also for the spiritual growth of Philemon, of everyone who would hear this amazing account. In faith, anything was possible, even the unwarranted emancipation of a fugitive slave. In granting that, Philemon would be demonstrating practical mercy and forgiveness in a way nothing else could. It was something the Lord would have asked, or done.

You and I are called to show that kind of boldness. In Him, even the boldest and most audacious things become likely.

For further reading: Matthew 7:7, Matthew 19:26, John 15:5, Acts 4:13, 2 Corinthians 1:11, Philippians 1:24, Hebrews 13:19, Philemon 23

King Jesus, bless me to be bold in You and for You today. Put words in my mouth to act out the love Your Spirit puts in my heart

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Practical Proverbial, from Philemon, 17 October 2019

Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends you greetings. And so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas and Luke, my fellow workers. Philemon 23-24. (EHV).

The closing of this brief letter gives it credibility. Paul included the names of his friends in the letter to Philemon for a number of reasons.

It was a way to send their greetings; practically speaking, that's the foremost reason. In the first century, other than word of mouth, this was the only way to send greetings.

It was a way to give his bold letter some depth. One can assume Paul wouldn't have mentioned these men if they hadn't known what he was saying in the letter. With that in mind, it could then also be assumed that they likely concurred with Paul's request (to free Onesimus). Otherwise, they may not have consented to Paul even mentioning them. By including their names, Paul was indicating that consent.

It provides historic reference. Mark and Luke went on to write two of the four Gospels. It is believed that Epaphras was a member of the young church in Colosse and would have been known to Philemon. It is also believed that Aristarchas was a fellow Christian who, like Paul, was martyred under Nero. As for Demas, it is thought that this is the man who later deserted Paul and went to Thessalonica, site of another new church. Demas, it is believed, fell away from the faith.

Yet for Paul to mention these people in this small letter meant that he was providing markers in the historical timeline for Philemon (and us) to reference. Indeed, it isn't unusual for things like this to occur all the way through the Bible. They make it one of the most referenced and historically accurate books from all of antiquity. They refute those who would say the Bible is untrue.

And that could very well be Paul's unwitting final reason for including the names here. Paul probably didn't think that people would be reading his mail two thousand years later yet here we are doing just that. His inclusion of the names of his contemporaries provides proof that both he and they actually existed. They are names God wanted Paul to include so that we might find credibility in the amazing request that Paul makes of his friend. And they're a lesson for us to learn when we're so far removed from those ancient times.

For further reading: 2 Timothy 4:8-10, Philemon 24

Lord God, thank You for including the names of these men so that my questioning heart would not question Your perfect words.

Practical Proverbial, from Philemon, 18 October 2019

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Philemon 25. (EHV).

This is the end of the letter to Philemon. As the writer of Madeline might have said, "that's all there is. There is no more." There doesn't need to be. We have sufficient information even as questions remain.

What happened with Philemon and Onesimus? To be honest, we don't know if Philemon freed Onesimus. We don't know if Onesimus actually went home. It is possible that he is the man who became a bishop and was later martyred either by stoning or beheading under the Roman emperor Domitian. Philemon, it is believed, also became a bishop, he in the church in Colosse. Again, these are things that are not factually known but are believed throughout the church tradition.

What about Paul? Not long after (within months, perhaps) he was martyred, likely beheaded at a spot just outside the city of Rome. Paul knew this was coming, knew it was the likely outcome of his confinement. Yet, knowing that, it's profound that Paul ended his short letter by invoking the grace of Jesus to be with his friend. Break that down and consider what Paul was actually saying.

Dictionary.com says that "grace" is "a manifestation of favor, especially by a superior." Paul invoked the favor of Jesus onto a man who he may have just alienated and angered. He did it knowing that he, himself, would likely soon die the ignoble death of a criminal. He did it knowing that Philemon might resent him, might reject him, might tell him to 'butt out' in spite of all the good things Paul had done in ministry.

Because that's what love does. Love doesn't fail. Love doesn't give up, or live in anger, or harbor resentment. The ultimate love in the universe was expressed on the cross through the grace and bleeding, dying love of Jesus. It was in that love that Paul first wrote to Philemon, asking him to go beyond the world in which they lived and forgive a new brother believer.

As the final words Paul would ever share with Philemon, Paul chose to share Jesus' grace, Jesus' love, so that Philemon would know this above all else. No matter whether Philemon acceded to Paul's request or rejected it, Paul spoke God's love into his friend as the most important thing of all. Can you imagine what we could do in this world, today, if we always did the same?

And that's where we'll leave Philemon. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. That's all there is; there is no more. And it's more than enough.

For further reading: 1 Corinthians 13

Lord Jesus, all praise to You for Your divine grace, for inspiring Paul to share it down through these centuries, for inspiring us to share it today.