

Love Above All Else (WINWIR Philemon) Pleasant Plains 5-12-2019PM. NICK ANGEL

- ***READ I Corinthians 13:13*** This statement concerning the everlasting endurance of love comes at the tail end of Paul dedicating an entire section of his first letter to the Corinthians on addressing this subject. This church had been dealing with attitudes of pride, arrogance, and selfishness. Disciples had been perceiving their fellow disciples in less than ideal ways based upon the gifts that God had given to them in the service of the kingdom. After the issues are addressed in chapter 12, Paul transitions to teach them about the one area in which all of the Corinthians brethren ought to excel and that was the area of love. I didn't matter if they were able to speak in angelic tongues, prophesy all of the mysteries of life, teach all knowledge the world could hold, or even give their bodies to be burned...if any of these great deeds were done without love then they were worthless before God.
- Even this morning we focused on John's instructions to the children of God that they be a people who did not just love in word but who also loved in their actions and in truth. Love truly is a, if not the, foundational principle of the Christian faith. There is one often neglected New Testament letter that teaches us a great deal about how love is to be seen in a very practical way in our lives, and this evening I would like for us to focus on the tiny letter that Paul wrote to his brother in the faith, Philemon.
- As I read through this short letter throughout this past week, I continually saw the same sense of the importance of love in the life of the disciple of Jesus being present even as it is back in **I Corinthians 13**. Whereas Paul states in that text that love must be at the heart of everything we do in Christ, here in Philemon I see Paul establishing a similar idea that love must be present above all else in everything that we do. Four times in the letter Paul specifically addresses the role of love in this situation between a slave and his master. We will address that very difficult issue in just a few moments, but for now let's read this short text together. We will then make note of the people mentioned in the letter, examine its plot, and then we will use the last few minutes of study to consider what we can learn from Paul's letter to Philemon.

What I Noticed When I Read Paul's Letter To Philemon

I. People Mentioned In The Letter:

- A. **Paul:** While there are always a few folks who are going to argue over the true authorship of different Biblical writings, it seems to be pretty clear cut that Paul is the author based upon his acknowledging such as being the case in both **v.1 & v.19**. Paul must have had very distinct handwriting since this is another instance of him using it as a proof of his authorship.
 - B. **Timothy:** A trusted coworker and protege of the Apostle Paul.
 - C. **Philemon:** Many believe that Philemon was a central figure within the church that was present in Colossae. We do know for certain that wherever he lived he allowed for the church to meet within his home. **(v.2) V.19** seems to give the indication that Paul had a part in his conversion to Jesus.
 - D. **Apphia & Archippus:** It is not known for certain, but many believe that Apphia would have been the wife of Philemon while Archippus was his son. We can find him mentioned by name by Paul in his closing remarks to the church in Colossae. *"Pay attention to the ministry you have received in the Lord, so that you can accomplish it."* **(Colossians 4:17)**
 - E. **Onesimus:** We can be confident based upon this letter that Onesimus was a runaway slave from the house of Philemon. **(vv.15,16)** Somehow he had found his way to Rome into the presence of the Apostle Paul while he was imprisoned, and he had become obedient to the Gospel. **(v.10)** He is also mentioned in **Colossians 4:9**.
 - F. **Epaphras, Mark, Aristarchus, Demas & Luke:** Each of these fellow Gospel ministers, along with Timothy, are mentioned in Paul's letter to Colossae, so it is a safe assumption to conclude that this letter was more than likely written around the same time as Colossians while Paul was in Roman custody in the years 61 or 62.
- With these individuals and details sorted out, let's now turn our attention to the purpose and plot of the letter that Paul wrote to Philemon concerning his slave Onesimus.

II. Purpose & Plot Of The Letter:

- A. **Paul begins by complimenting the love & faith of Philemon. (vv.1-7)**
 1. We do not have any record of Paul actually ever visiting the church in Colossae, and he even laments the fact that he had never met many of the disciples who were in Colossae & Laodicea. **(Colossians 2:1)** It

could be that Paul was present when the church was very small, or it could be that this church was established through indirect work done by the Apostle Paul. Regardless, we can see that Paul would have been well aware of this church based upon what was told to him by Epaphras. **(Colossians 1:7,8; 4:12)**

2. Whether Paul had met Philemon or not, his reputation of great faithfulness and love obviously preceded him. Paul acknowledges him as a *“dear friend and coworker”*, and he expresses this continued thanks to God for the work that he was doing in the kingdom of God. *“For I have great joy and encouragement from your love because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you, brother.”* (v.7)

B. Paul appeals to him on behalf of his runaway servant & now disciple of Jesus, Onesimus. (vv.8-11)

1. After speaking of his love and faithfulness, Paul gets into the purpose of this letter which was to write to Philemon on behalf of a slave of his who had run away at some point. Onesimus had somehow found his way to Paul, and through this time spent with Paul he had become a disciple of Jesus Christ. Paul even mentions in **vv.11,13** that this man had become useful to him by serving him very well during his time of imprisonment. He had not only taken on the name of Christ, but he had taken on the work of serving Christ and His people.
2. We might wonder how it is that Onesimus would have been able to be such an aid to the Apostle Paul, and that is answered when we consider that Paul's imprisonment in Rome wasn't as bad as it could have been. While we might think that any imprisonment under the Romans would have been the most horrible of circumstances, we would be happy to know that Paul's two-year stint in Rome involved him being able to live in rented quarters where he was able to write and have visitors such as Onesimus. **(Acts 28:16,30,31)** Though Paul was still very much a prisoner, he was fortunately able to continue to do good work for the kingdom of God even while in chains.

C. Paul appeals that Philemon would receive his slave back as a brother in Christ. (vv.12-17)

1. Paul's appeal to Philemon centers around his sending Onesimus back to Philemon and his desire for Philemon to accept him back into his household as not only a slave but also as a brother in Christ. Onesimus had run away from his position as a slave of Philemon, but Paul instructed him that he needed to return to his rightful place. *“For perhaps this is why he was separated from you for a brief time, so that you might get him back permanently, no longer as a slave, but more than a slave — as a dearly loved brother. He is especially so to me, but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord.”* **(vv.15,16)**
2. Let's pause right here for a moment to consider the elephant in the room in this discussion...Why wasn't Paul condemning Philemon for his owning of slaves? Why wasn't Paul telling Onesimus to stay or go elsewhere and keep his freedom? I believe the answers lie in the fact that the slavery that was common in the first century was often very different from what we think of concerning slavery, and that is based upon the horrible form of slavery that is a blood stain on our country's history. Consider these points to help understand why Paul was encouraging what he was:
 - a) The slavery of the Bible was sometimes more akin to indentured servitude. Joseph was technically a slave to Potiphar, but he was still elevated to a position of authority within the house. **(Gen. 39:1-4)** Sometimes this slavery was a result of people being taken captive, but it could also have been a result of people being in debt and needing it to be paid off. **(Matthew 18:21-35)**
 - b) With this in mind, consider that New Testament letters instruct disciples as to how they ought to operate within this type of household dynamic. It could just be coincidence, but Paul wrote to the Colossians, *“Slaves, obey your human masters in everything. Don't work only while being watched, as people-pleasers, but work wholeheartedly, fearing the Lord. Whatever you do, do it from the heart, as something done for the Lord and not for people, knowing that you will receive the reward of an inheritance from the Lord. You serve the Lord Christ. For the wrongdoer will be paid back for whatever wrong he has done, and there is no favoritism. Masters, deal with your slaves justly and fairly, since you know that you too have a Master in heaven.”* **(Colossians 3:22-4:1)**

3. While I can recognize the feelings that these writings can stir up with people who have their minds set upon the slavery of America's past, we must recognize that the slave masters of those days were in no way, shape, or form following the instructions of the Apostle Paul. Even simply following the great command of loving your neighbor as yourself would have eliminated the abuse that was present in many master/slave arrangements. Nonetheless, the model that Paul is imploring Philemon to adopt with Onesimus is one of love and respect not just as Onesimus being a fellow human but even more so for him being a brother in Christ. Paul expected for Philemon to welcome Onesimus back even as he would have welcomed Paul into his home. **(v.17)**
- D. Paul shows his love for Onesimus by taking on responsibility for any harm previously done by his running away. (vv.18,19)**
1. It seems very obvious that Paul was not wanting to send Onesimus back to Philemon, but he recognized that this was the right thing to do. **(v.14)** He greatly loved this new brother in Christ, even referring to him as *"my very own heart."* **(v.12)** He wanted to keep Onesimus with himself, but he knew the proper thing to do was to send him back to his proper place of Philemon's household.
 2. Paul further shows his love for Onesimus by stating that he was willing to repay anything damages or harm that Onesimus had caused by his running away. He states plainly that he was good to repay anything that might be owed. This is Paul clearly showing his love for Onesimus as though he was truly his own son. **(vv.18,19)**
- E. He expresses confidence in Philemon's obedience to Paul's appeal concerning his reception of Onesimus. (vv.20,21)**
1. In Wes McAdams article on this letter, he states that his first impressions of this letter were that Paul was being less than sincere in what he was writing. He had inklings that Paul was being passive-aggressive with his appeal towards Philemon, but he ultimately decided that he believed Paul's sincerity in this letter, and I think I would agree with him based upon the strong words of commendation that Paul writes in the opening verses of the letter.
 2. Paul had every right to send this letter in the form of a command based upon his apostolic authority, but he is instead very confident that Philemon was the type of man who didn't have to be commanded in order to do the right thing on the basis of love. He wanted to give Philemon the opportunity to do this good deed out of love and not obligation. **(v.14)** Paul seemed extremely confident that not only would Philemon do that which was right, but he was also confident that he would go even beyond what Paul expected him to do in the reception of his new brother in Christ...this might even extend to allowing Onesimus to have his freedom.
- F. Paul states that he hopes to be freed so that he might visit. (v.22)**
1. After expressing his full confidence in Philemon, Paul concludes by asking that he would prepare a room for him to stay in when he hopefully was released.
 2. Was this a warning of sorts that Paul was expecting to visit to check in whether or not things were as they ought to be? Obviously we don't know, and we don't know if Paul every made such a visit.

With the purpose and plot having been considered, let's now turn our attention to thinking about a handful of lessons that we can take away from this short letter of the Apostle Paul.

III. What We Can Learn From This Letter:

A. There is great value in showing our genuine love through our actions.

1. As we mentioned, we're not sure if Paul had ever met Philemon prior to the writing of this letter, but I do believe that we can be confident that Epaphras has spoken very highly of this disciple, and he had done so on the basis of the great acts of love that he had done in his life. Philemon doesn't seem to have been someone who only loved in words, but he showed and expressed his great love through his actions.
2. Philemon's willingness to love in action seems to have bought him the benefit of the doubt in the eyes of the Apostle Paul, and we would do well to consider the great value that is associated with being know as a person who is willing to truly love his or her neighbor as themselves.

3. Another benefit of being known as a loving person is that people are willing to appeal to your apparent love instead of seeking to use force to move you to doing certain things. Those types of conversations go so much better when they are approached from a standpoint of love instead of one person forcing another person to do a particular thing.

B. Love is a powerful motivator and influencer.

1. If we are a people who truly love the Lord then we are going to be a people who truly love other people. That love that we have for others must move and influence us to always seek the best for others. We truly seek to love them as ourselves and even consider their needs more than our own. **(Philippians 2:4)**
2. This is even true when it comes to situations where we might have been wronged such as was the case between Philemon and Onesimus. If we will be a people who have hearts full of love then the patience that God exhibits towards us will be seen even within ourselves so that the greatest resolution to a difficult situation might be accomplished.

C. Obedience to Christ changes relationships.

1. Philemon and Onesimus had once been in a relationship that Paul would describe as Onesimus being useless to Philemon **(v.11)**, but now Onesimus was a fellow disciple. This led Paul to write to Philemon that things would need to be different between him and Onesimus. When Philemon was to receive him back he was to do so while seeing Onesimus as more than a slave. Instead he was to see him as a dearly loved brother. Their relationship was so much deeper than ever before because it was now a relationship that was founded upon Christ.
2. While we wouldn't see this same dynamic in our own lives, the closest example I can think of is what takes place when a child becomes obedient to the Gospel. No longer do we view those people as simply our children, but we now acknowledge them as being brothers & sisters in Christ.

D. Obedience to Christ doesn't necessarily change stations in life.

1. However, that obedience doesn't always change our station in life. What I mean by this is that Paul was still sending Onesimus back to Philemon as his slave. Yes, Paul expected for Philemon to do right by Onesimus as his new brother, but Onesimus was still to serve in that capacity.
2. The same is true for children. Yes, they might have been become fellow brothers and sisters in Christ, but they are still our children and are responsible for fulfilling that role as such. The same is true even for those who might come to Christ while in prison. Yes, they might have their sins forgiven, but becoming a Christian doesn't necessarily alleviate the positions we currently find ourselves in.

E. Love should be at the root of everything we do in Christ.

1. Everything in this letter can be traced back to the love that was to be in the hearts of disciples of Jesus. Paul wrote to Philemon to commend his love for saints and appeal to him on the basis of it. Paul speaks of his deep love for Onesimus, and he even expresses that love in action by his willingness to pay for his wrong doings in his running away.
2. Now, it was time for Philemon to show his love for even Onesimus by receiving him back in a loving manner as a brother and move forward with that reality as the foundation of their relationship. Love is clearly at the heart of everything that is going on in Paul's letter to Philemon, and that must be because love ought to be at the heart of everything that we do as disciples of Jesus Christ.

We often don't give the seemingly insignificant short letters of the New Testament the proper attention that they deserve, and I hope that our considerations in this letter this evening will help to remind us of God's ever present desire for us to be a people of love. Regardless of the relationship that we have with others, it is expected of us that we see them as souls that God loves so that we might love them even as He does. May these things be on our hearts and minds this week, and may we be a people who truly love not only in word but also in action.