

## For Love's Sake

By Al Felder

*<sup>1</sup>Paul, a prisoner of Jesus Christ, and Timothy our beloved brother, unto Philemon our dearly beloved, and fellow laborer, <sup>2</sup>And to our beloved Apphia, and Archippus our fellow soldier, and to the church in thy house: <sup>3</sup>Grace to you, and peace, from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. <sup>4</sup>I thank my God, making mention of thee always in my prayers, <sup>5</sup>Hearing of thy love and faith, which thou hast toward the Lord Jesus, and toward all saints; <sup>6</sup>That the communication of thy faith may become effectual by the acknowledging of every good thing which is in you in Christ Jesus. <sup>7</sup>For we have great joy and consolation in thy love, because the bowels of the saints are refreshed by thee, brother. <sup>8</sup>Wherefore, though, I might be much bold in Christ to enjoin thee that which is convenient, <sup>9</sup>Yet for love's sake I rather beseech thee, being such a one as Paul the aged, and now also a prisoner of Jesus Christ. <sup>10</sup>I beseech thee for my son Onesimus, whom I have begotten in my bonds: <sup>11</sup>Which in time past was to thee unprofitable, but now profitable to thee and to me: <sup>12</sup>Whom I have sent again: thou therefore receive him, that is, mine own bowels: <sup>13</sup>Whom I would have retained with me, that in thy stead he might have ministered unto me in the bonds of the gospel: <sup>14</sup>But without thy mind would I do nothing; that thy benefit should not be as it were of necessity, but willingly. <sup>15</sup>For perhaps he therefore departed for a season, that thou shouldest receive him forever; <sup>16</sup>Not now as a servant, but above a servant, a brother beloved, specially to me, but how much more unto thee, both in the flesh, and in the Lord? <sup>17</sup>If thou count me therefore a partner, receive him as myself. <sup>18</sup>If he hath wronged thee, or oweth thee ought, put that on mine account: <sup>19</sup>I Paul have written it with mine own hand, I will repay it: albeit I do not say to thee how thou owest unto me even thine own self besides. <sup>20</sup>Yea, brother, let me have joy of thee in the Lord: refresh my bowels in the Lord. <sup>21</sup>Having confidence in thy obedience I wrote unto thee, knowing that thou wilt also do more than I say. <sup>22</sup>But withal prepare me also lodging: for I trust that through your prayers I shall be given unto you. <sup>23</sup>There salute thee Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus; <sup>24</sup>Marcus, Aristarchus, Demas, Lucas, my fellow laborers. <sup>25</sup>The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Amen." (Philemon)*

Paul, of course, is the inspired author of this Epistle. He wrote it during his first imprisonment in Rome around 62, 63 AD. It was about the same time that he wrote the Epistle to the Colossians. Incidentally, Colossae was probably the location of Philemon. *"With Onesimus, a faithful and beloved brother, who is one of you."* (Colossians 4:9) Paul sent the Epistle to the Colossians with Onesimus who is the subject of the Epistle to Philemon.

Philemon was one of Paul's own converts. It is likely that he was a member of the church at Colossae. He was a beloved friend and fellow laborer in the faith. He was known as a faithful, loving, and hospitable Christian.

Onesimus was Philemon's slave. He ran away, and eventually made his way to Rome. It was there that he came in contact with Paul, and was converted to Christ. Onesimus had become very dear to Paul, and had proven himself to be useful in the work of the Gospel.

This epistle was written for the purpose of promoting forgiveness and reconciliation. There was a problem between Philemon and Onisimus that needed to be corrected. Paul wanted Philemon to receive back Onesimus, and this letter was written to restore their relationship.

In dealing with this matter, Paul started off by telling Philemon what he meant to Paul personally. These two men had a great relationship with one another. When dealing with problems, it helps to have a good relationship with the people involved. If you are going to successfully help people with all the mess that often accumulates in their lives they must know you and trust you. Such relationships come with hard work and dedication to God.

Those who accomplish this task are leaders. The church desperately needs leaders today, not a bunch of decision makers. Leaders fix problems while decision makers make them worse. A leader does things for the general welfare of all, but a decision maker only looks out for his own interests. He wants to make sure that his voice is heard.

Philemon was not a decision maker, he was a leader. It was for this reason that Paul had such confidence in him. He was known for his love towards Christ and the brethren. Philemon was an encourager. He sought to build others up in the faith, and Christians felt refreshed when they were around him. What a statement about this man's faith!

How do people feel when they are around you? Do you ever think about that? I have been around some people whom I thoroughly enjoy their company. In fact, you could say I look forward to seeing them. They make you feel good about yourself. They encourage you to try harder. They make you feel appreciated and loved.

Now, I've also been around some people that I dread seeing. I know as soon as I see them they are going to complain about something. They are always unhappy, and look to find fault with something or someone. They have no joy, and despise those who do.

Sometimes I have to step back and take a close look at myself and ask, "Which type of person am I?" Am I someone who encourages others and makes them feel refreshed, or am I that person who other people dread? What type of person are you?

Paul had the authority to command Philemon in this situation, but he didn't. Paul approached the situation in a humble manner. *"Let your speech be always with grace, seasoned with salt, that ye may know how ye ought to answer every man."* (Colossians 4:6) When Philemon read the Epistle to the Colossians he knew that Paul had practiced what he preached in his dealings with him. When dealing with problems you have to know how to handle situations in order to bring about the best possible outcome. That is the goal!

During a football game this year there was a parent on the sideline yelling and cheering for his son. Well, spectators aren't supposed to be on the sideline during a game. The referees said something to the coach, and the coach asked me to handle the situation because I was the administrator on duty.

My wife told me later that as soon as the other parents in the stand realized what I was doing they said, "He's fixing to get cussed out." You see, this particular parent had developed a reputation for being difficult to deal with. I approached him and explained the situation to him, and he was not happy. He said some words, and told me he was not going to move.

I'll be honest with you, the fleshly part of me wanted to go get the sheriff deputy and have him yanked off the sideline. I decided to take a different approach, however. I began talking to the man about his son, and how much I enjoyed teaching him. He began to loosen up, and said, "I'm going to sit in the bleachers now."

You see, the way I handled the situation allowed us to have a relationship. Incidentally, that wasn't the only time I had to pull him off the sideline either. The next time it happened he smiled when he saw me and said, "I knew you were coming for me when I saw you walking this way." We walked back to the bleachers together joking and laughing the whole way. It matters how you handle a situation.

Paul was careful how he handled this matter. He wasn't going to use his apostolic authority to force Philemon to do what was right. When you force someone to do something you may be successful in putting them in their place, but that person hasn't really changed. They still feel the same way, and will harbor the same attitude.

In fact, that's what's wrong with some Christians. They do things because they believe they have to do them. For example, why are you here this morning? Are you here because you believe you have to be here, or because you want to be here? You see, there is a big difference between Christians who follow the Bible because they believe they have to, and those who follow the Bible because they want to.

Christians who follow the Bible because they believe they have to are often miserable. They have just enough faith to make them unhappy. The commands of God are grievous to them because they really don't want to keep them. They often pick and choose between God's commands, and ultimately only obey the ones they can tolerate. Even in these few commands, however, they are still miserable.

Those who want to obey are quite different. They actually enjoy the commands of God. They seek to obey because of their love for God. They have joy in serving the Lord, and gladly correct their life when necessary. I don't know about you, but I'm here this morning because there is no other place I'd rather be. Can you say that and mean it?

Paul's appeal to Philemon was for love's sake. Isn't that a beautiful way to seek reconciliation between two people? *"And now abideth faith, hope, and charity, these three; but*

*the greatest of these is charity.”* (1 Corinthians 13:13) Listen to what the Bible says about faith and hope. *“Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.”* (Hebrews 11:1) *“For we are saved by hope: but hope that is seen is not hope: for what a man seeth, why doth he yet hope for?”* (Romans 8:24) On this side of eternity we have faith and hope for things that we cannot see, but one day faith and hope will give way. One day I will see that which I had faith in, and I will possess that for which I hoped. One day faith and hope would have served their purpose, but love has an eternal purpose. Love is everlasting, and that is why it is the greatest.

Listen, we can have no part of God if we do not have love. *“<sup>8</sup>He that loveth not knoweth not God; for God is love. <sup>20</sup>If a man say, I love God, and hateth his brother, he is a liar: for he that loveth not his brother whom he hath seen, how can he love God whom he hath not seen?”* (1 John 4:8, 20) This morning if you are harboring ill will towards a brother or sister in Christ, the Bible says you do not love God. Furthermore, the Bible says that you are a liar when you claim to love God. Those aren’t my words, those are God’s words!

Love compels us to seek the good of others. Love compels us to put the needs of others before our own. Love compels us to seek to serve others instead of seeking to be served. Love compels us to rejoice with others when they rejoice, and to mourn with them when they mourn. Love compels us to help one another with the burdens of life. Love compels us to have mercy and forgive. Love compels us to make sacrifices. Isn’t that what Jesus did?

Paul was sending Onesimus back to Philemon. Apparently there were some things that Onesimus needed to make right. *“<sup>23</sup>Therefore if thou bring thy gift to the altar, and there remeberest that thy brother hath ought against thee; <sup>24</sup>Leave there thy gift before the altar, and go thy way; first be reconciled to thy brother, and then come and offer thy gift.”* (Matthew 5:23, 24) You see, we don’t have to wait for someone to come to us. If we know that a problem exists between us and another member of the body of Christ, love compels us to go to them in order to make things right.

That’s also a difference between a Christian who wants to obey, and one who believes they have to obey. A Christian who wants to obey realizes the importance and significance of having peace and unity in the body of Christ. They don’t want to be the cause of anything that will hinder the spreading of the Gospel, or bring harm to the church. A Christian who believes they have to obey never makes the first move. They allow things to fester and get to a boiling point. They want people to come before them and grovel for their forgiveness because they are reasoning with the flesh, not the spirit.

Onesimus was a Christian who wanted to obey. He loved the Lord so much that he was willing to return to a life of slavery in order to serve God faithfully. Let that sink in for just a moment. This man willingly returned to slavery in order to make things right with another brother in Christ. Friends, that’s humility. That’s the difference between someone who is

serving the Lord because they want to, verse someone who is serving because they believe they have to.

I do want to say something briefly about slavery. Many people criticize the Bible because, in a situation such as this one, the Bible doesn't call for emancipation. Onesimus was going back to Philemon as a slave. Many people believe that in such situations active resistance should be undertaken. They seek to protest and become activists in order to bring about the social reform they desire. Many people also seek to bring about the change they desire through their elected officials and politicize Christianity. Such methods are not God's methods.

The Gospel will inevitably reform any culture. Not because of protests or political action, but because of the hearts and minds of men and women being changed through their obedience to God.

*"<sup>12</sup>Put on therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, bowels of mercies, kindness, humbleness of mind, meekness, longsuffering; <sup>13</sup>Forbearing one another, and forgiving one another, if any man have a quarrel against any: even as Christ forgave you, so also do ye. <sup>14</sup>And above all these things put on charity, which is the bond of perfectness. <sup>15</sup>And let the peace of God rule in your hearts, to the which also ye are called in one body; and be ye thankful."* (Colossians 3:12-15)

You see, Philemon was no longer to receive Onesimus as a slave, but as a brother in Christ. His obedience to God would cause him to leave behind the social ills of man, and love his brother.

Finally, within this epistle we find a beautiful parallel to our own salvation. You see, we too are slaves. *"Know ye not, that to whom ye yield yourselves servants to obey, his servants ye are to whom ye obey; whether of sin unto death, or of obedience unto righteousness?"* (Romans 6:16) Like Onesimus, we have a debt that we cannot pay. Our debt is the result of sin. Paul interceded for Onesimus and told Philemon to charge whatever Onesimus owed to his account. He would repay it. Likewise, Jesus Christ has paid our debt and intercedes for those who obey Him. *"Wherefore he is able also to save them to the uttermost that come unto God by him, seeing he ever liveth to make intercession for them."* (Hebrews 7:25) He did this for the sake of love.

What about you? Are you willing to acknowledge and be thankful for the good in others, to encourage them, to expect the best from others, and to forgive as Christ has forgiven you? Are you willing to allow the Gospel to change you so that any relationship can be strengthened and healed; a troubled marriage, a strained friendship, or Church problems? Are you willing to do these things for love's sake?