**Bethel Christian Fellowship**

**Fair Lawn, NJ**

**The Message Of Philemon (2): Transformed By The Gospel**

**“Faith And Love; Visible Virtues”**

**Philemon 4-7**

**November 26, 2023**

Anyone familiar with Paul’s life and ministry can see that he was a grateful man. We know this because most of the references to thanksgiving in the New Testament are found in his letters. Gratitude also played a major role in his prayers as well. Rarely did he ever pray for his readers without giving thanks. Thanksgiving was always at the core of his petition and intercession for others.

For the Romans he prayed, “*First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is being reported all over the world*” (Rom. 1:8). For the Corinthians he prayed, “*I thank God for you because of the grace given you in Christ Jesus. For in him you have been enriched in every way – in all your speaking and in all your knowledge*” (1 Cor. 1:4-5). Similar expressions of gratitude are found at the beginning of Ephesians (1:15-16), Philippians (1:3), Colossians (1:4-5), and First and Second Thessalonians (1 Thess. 1:2-4; 2 Thess. 1:3).

Paul’s letter to Philemon is no exception. Despite the difficult circumstances he faced in Rome, Philemon was a source of great joy and encouragement to Paul. News has come from Colossae about Philemon’s faith in the Lord Jesus and his love “*for all the saints*.” His love was evidenced by his willingness to open his home for the church to meet on the Lord’s Day (v. 2). He had also “*refreshed the hearts of the saints,*” undoubtedly in many other ways, both materially and spiritually (v. 7). But rather than congratulate Philemon, Paul thanks God (vv. 4-5).

His prayer for Philemon naturally follows (vv. 6-7). In light of his hospitality and generosity, Paul’s great desire is that Philemon take one more step and extend this same kindness and love to Onesimus. As we shall see, this thought is clearly implied in Paul’s prayer for his “*dear friend and fellow worker*” (v. 1). He is laying the groundwork for his appeal that will follow (v. 8ff).

**A. Paul’s Thanksgiving (vv. 4-5):** “*I always thank my God as I remember you in my prayers, because I hear about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints*” (NIV). In these two brief verses, there are a number of important things we can learn about Paul’s thanksgiving and Philemon’s faith and love.

*First*, Paul *always* thanked God for him whenever he prayed for him. This is but another example of how thanksgiving is at the core of his intercession and prayer. It’s no surprise, then, that he writes to the Colossian Christians meeting in Philemon’s home: “*Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful*” (Col. 4:2; Cf. Phil. 4:6-7; Eph. 5:20). If we are not thankful for what God has already done in our lives (and in the lives of others), how can we be confident that He will do what we are now asking of Him? Thanksgiving instills confidence in us, rather than uncertainty, as we pray.

*Second*, the messenger who brought this news about Philemon was probably Epaphras, the spiritual leader of the Colossian church and a Colossian himself (Col. 4:12, 13), who is now with Paul (Philem. 23). In all likelihood, Onesimus also supplied further details about Philemon’s faith and love (Col. 4:7-9). This report, therefore, is from an objective source (Epaphras) and a much more subjective one (Onesimus, the eyes and ears within Philemon’s home). There is no question in Paul’s mind that Philemon is the real deal!

*Third*, Philemon’s love was for “*all of the saints,*” not just some of the saints. It wasn’t a selective love; it transcended socio-economic achievements, the color of one’s skin, and one’s ethnic or national heritage. It was genuine, Christian love (*agape*).

*Fourth*, his faith in the Lord Jesus and his love for the saints did not exist independently of each other. A love “*for all the saints*” can only spring from a saving faith in Christ, and a saving faith in Christ governs a love for all the saints. It refuses to compromise when the truths of the faith are at stake.

*Fifth*, Philemon’s faith and love were visible, public virtues. Others had taken note of it and passed along the good news to the apostle. How else would Paul have “heard” of his faith and love for all the saints? Epaphras and Onesimus (and others) had seen it in action! Yes, faith and love are personal (within our hearts); but no, they are never private and invisible virtues.

**B. Paul’s Prayer (vv. 6-7):** “*. . . and I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective for the full knowledge of every good thing that is in us for the sake of Christ. For I have derived much joy and comfort from your love, my brother, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed by you*” (ESV). It’s right at this point that we begin to realize that Paul’s letter is *two* letters in one. There are the actual words, by which Paul is communicating his message; and there’s the stronger message, written between the lines.

Philemon had already been active in the “sharing” of his faith. But this “sharing” was much more than communicating his faith so that others would trust in Christ (i.e., evangelizing). Given the context, it’s best understood as the sharing of his resources, in a true spirit of generosity and hospitability. Had he not already opened his home for Sunday services (v. 2)? Had not his love already refreshed the hearts of the Colossian Christians (v. 7)?

If so, then Paul’s request is that the sharing of Philemon’s resources, which arises from his faith, “*may become effective*”; meaning, that it might result in some generous action towards Onesimus. This would, in turn, help Philemon gain “*the full knowledge of every good thing that is in us for the sake of the gospel*;” meaning, a deeper understanding and appreciation of the blessings that Christ has for him. By giving more, we always gain greater blessings, so that we can give even more for the cause of Christ. But in Philemon’s case, the resources necessary for this task “are resources not of material affluence but of Christian grace” (F. F. Bruce).

Finally, the “*joy and encouragement*” of which Paul speaks (v. 7a) was his *response* to the good news he had received about Philemon’s love, which has “*refreshed the hearts of the saints*” (v.7b). Once again, in the words of Bruce, “It was natural for him to rejoice that one of his converts was showing the reality of his faith by the practice of Christian charity, but his joy was coupled with encouragement as he reflected that a man who gave evidence of such qualities was the more likely to grant the personal request which he was about to make.” If he’s done this for *all* the saints, then he surely will do this for one more!

All of this points to the fundamental reason why Paul is thanking God for Philemon’s love and faith, as opposed to congratulating him. By thanking God, rather than complimenting Philemon, Paul is recognizing that God is the source of Philemon’s love and faith. What, then, does all this mean for us? Here’s how we connect the dots:

* Does faith live within our hearts?
* Do we feel a deep and abiding affection for the people of God?
* Do we delight in showing compassion and generosity towards others in this local body of believers?

If we do, then let’s not pat one another on the back. Rather, let’s lift our voices towards heaven and thank God for the people in our lives who have this kind of love and loyalty for Christ – and for us!

Oh, how good it is to embrace His command

To prefer one another, forgive as He forgives.

When we live as one, we all share in the love

Of the Son with the Father and the Spirit.

So with one voice we’ll sing to the Lord;

And with one heart we’ll live out His Word.

Till the whole earth sees the Redeemer has come

For He dwells in the presence of His people.

(Keith & Kristin Getty, Stuart Townend, Ross Holmes, 2012)