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GODLY RELATIONSHIPS

Philemon 1-25

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Philemon Lesson 2

Godly Relationships Philemon 1-25

Once upon a time, a mean old mountaineer fell sick and died. There were no funeral directors back in the hills then, and embalming was not yet practiced. So the widow and family dressed the body and placed it in the coffin. As the deceased was being carried from the house, one pallbearer stumbled, causing the coffin to crash into a gatepost. The knock somehow revived the old mountaineer, who sat up yelling at everyone in sight.

The man lived for over a year and was as mean as ever. Then he got sick and died again. Once more the body was put in the coffin and the pallbearers lifted their burden. As they shuffled by, the long-suffering widow lifted her head and said, "Watch out for that gatepost!" (Merritt K. Freeman, *Reader's Digest*, July, 1983.)

Most of us have known difficult people like that. Maybe they're in your family. I hope that none are in this church, but it's possible. You may not be so bold as to wish that they would die, but you may secretly wish that if that fate befell them, they wouldn't get resurrected!

The gospel of Jesus Christ brings together people of diverse backgrounds and personalities, increasing the possibility for strained relationships. We can see this in this short letter of Philemon. We have Paul, a scholarly, zealous Jew and former Pharisee; Philemon, a wealthy Gentile businessman; and, Onesimus, a runaway slave. Any time you bring together people from such varied backgrounds, you have the potential either for great conflict or great glory. It brings great glory to God when people who would normally be at one another's throats instead love one another because of the reality of Jesus Christ.

The potential for great conflict is increased when the divergent persons brought together by the gospel live in a culture permeated by inhuman and unjust social institutions. The Roman world accepted slavery as a matter of course. Slaves had no protection under Roman law. J. B. Lightfoot (*Saint Paul's Epistles to the*

Colossians and to Philemon [Zondervan], pp. 321-322) writes that two or three years before Paul wrote to Philemon, a slave had killed his master, a Roman senator. The law demanded that when this happened, all of the slaves in the household would be executed along with the one who did it. The senator had 400 slaves! The populace tried to intervene to save them from this unjust treatment. The Roman Senate held a special hearing and decided that the law needed to be carried out. All 400 were executed!

This was the social background and cultural mindset behind Paul's letter to Philemon. If Paul could persuade Philemon to forgive this slave who had wronged him and, even more, to accept him as a brother in Christ, the word would spread like wildfire. When people asked, "Why did Philemon forgive this slave?" they would hear, "Because he follows Jesus, who taught His followers to love one another." The potential for the gospel and the glory of God was great!

It's no different today. The world is watching the lives of Christians to see whether they really are different because of the gospel. Does following Christ make a difference in our homes? Do we work through our problems with kindness, gentleness, patience, and understanding?

What about in our churches? This is why racial diversity in the local church is important. It's easy to say, "In Christ there is no white or black, no Navajo or Hispanic," when we segregate our churches according to race. But we ought to demonstrate the truth of that by meeting together across racial and cultural barriers. Racism in the local church erases the message that we are called to proclaim. Jesus said (John 13:35), "By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another." Thus the furtherance of the gospel depends upon godly relationships among Christians. The book of Philemon teaches us that...

Godly relationships glorify God and demonstrate
the reality of the gospel in our lives.

We are flooded with supposedly Christian books telling you how to use God and the Bible to reach your full potential, to boost your self-esteem, to achieve your best life now, etc. They convey the worldly message that it's all about you.

But the Bible is radically God-centered. It's all about God and His glory. The main reason that you should work through your marriage problems and relate to your children in a loving manner is *not* so that you'll have a happy family, although it will result in that. The main reason you should work through your family problems in a godly manner is so that God will be glorified and others will be drawn to the Savior.

Worldly people should look at your marriage and home life and marvel at how you love one another. That's when you tell them the difference that Jesus Christ has made in your life. He gets the glory and, of course, you enjoy the harmony of a happy home. But it's all about His glory and the testimony of the gospel first. That's why when Paul gives instruction to wives and husbands (Eph. 5:22-33), he says (5:32), "This mystery is great; but I am speaking with reference to Christ and the church." Your marriage is to reflect the loving relationship between Christ and His church.

The same is true with regard to unity in the local church. When believers cannot get along and split over minor doctrinal differences or personality conflicts, it is not a great advertisement for the gospel. The world looks at the church, shrugs its shoulders, and says, "They're no different than we are." But when we demonstrate the love of Christ, especially across cultural, social, and racial barriers, the world takes notice.

That's why Paul not only addressed this letter to Philemon, but also Apphia (probably Philemon's wife), Archippus (perhaps the pastor of the church; Col. 4:17), and the entire church that gathered in their home. Paul included all of them because the matter of forgiving Onesimus and accepting him as a brother in Christ was a matter of corporate testimony. It was an opportunity for God to be glorified and for the gospel to spread in that city. Godly relationships in our homes and in the church glorify God and demonstrate the reality of the gospel in our lives.

With that as a foundation, I'd like to spell out ten principles for godly relationships as seen in how Paul relates to Philemon. This is not a comprehensive list, of course. But they are lessons worth learning and practicing for God's glory and the furtherance of the gospel.

PRINCIPLES FOR GODLY RELATIONSHIPS:

1. Be rightly related to God by grace through faith in Christ.

These are not just common sense principles that might appear in a *Reader's Digest* article. Rather, they must be built on the foundation of heart-transformation that comes through faith in Christ. In verse 5, Paul refers to Philemon's "love and the faith which you have toward the Lord Jesus and toward all the saints." Probably, Paul begins by thinking of Philemon's love. Then he goes to the source of that love, which is his faith in the Lord Jesus. He completes the thought by going back to the object of his love, namely, all the saints (Lightfoot, pp. 334-335).

The key to loving relationships is that God has transformed your heart by His grace and love in sending His Son to die for your sins. As Jesus told the disciples just before He went to the cross, they were to love one another just as He had loved them (John 13:34). When you live daily in light of the truth that the Son of God loved you and gave Himself for you, you have the proper foundation to love others, even those who are not easy to love.

2. Affirm the value and contribution of each person.

Throughout this short letter, Paul affirms both Philemon and Onesimus. There is a way of using affirmation manipulatively, but when you do this, the other person usually senses your wrong motives. But Paul had a way of genuinely affirming people and acknowledging the valuable contribution that each one was making for the cause of Christ. Paul begins (v. 1) by addressing Philemon as a "beloved brother and fellow worker." He thanks God for Philemon because of his faith and love (vv. 4-5). He expresses his joy and comfort that stem from Philemon's love and mentions how the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through him (v. 7). He goes on to ask Philemon to show the same love toward this new brother, Onesimus. But you don't get the feeling that Paul is flattering Philemon to manipulate him to do what Paul wants. Rather, he was truly appreciative of Philemon's life and ministry in Christ.

How long has it been since you've told your mate or your children how much you appreciate them in a specific way? Maybe someone at church has ministered to you or encouraged you. Let

the person know, either verbally or by a written note, how much you appreciate what he or she did.

3. Pray for the person and tell him so.

Paul tells Philemon that he thanks God for him and prays for him (v. 4). Again, be careful to be genuine about this! Don't say, "I'll pray for you" to sound spiritual, and then fail to pray. If I tell someone that I will pray for him, I usually stop and do it as soon as I can, so that I don't forget. When we pray for one another, God uses it to form a bond of love. This even applies when you're angry with someone or when a relationship is strained. Have you noticed that it's hard to pray sincerely for someone and stay angry with him at the same time! I am not referring to praying imprecatory psalms against him, but genuinely praying for God's blessing in his life! And, it is hard to be angry with somebody who tells you that he has been praying for you!

Paul's prayer (v. 6) is difficult Greek to translate, as reflected in the variations among the English versions. We can't be dogmatic, but I think Paul is praying that Philemon's generosity ("fellowship") that stems from his faith will grow in effectiveness as he learns all of the good things that God has given to him for Christ's sake. In other words, as Philemon realizes what God has generously given to him, it will cause him to overflow with generosity and grace towards others.

4. Whenever possible, appeal rather than command.

Paul had authority as an apostle to command Philemon to accept Onesimus, but he rather appeals to him (vv. 8-10), so that (v. 14), "your goodness would not be, in effect, by compulsion but of your own free will." He wanted Philemon's forgiveness and acceptance of Onesimus to come from his heart, not grudgingly.

Paul's appeal was not just to Philemon's mind, but also to his heart or emotions. Paul could have just said, "Philemon, you need to do this. Here are my reasons. End of the discussion!" But instead, he says (v. 9), "yet for love's sake I rather appeal to you—since I am such a person as Paul, the aged, and now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus." Paul was probably only 55-60, but he had suffered a lot, so his body was wearing out. Six times in this short letter, Paul refers to his imprisonment (vv. 1, 9, 10, 13, 22, 23). As Bishop

Lightfoot puts it (p. 333), "How could Philemon resist an appeal which was penned within prison walls and by a manacled hand?" Paul refers to Onesimus as his child (v. 10), and tells Philemon that in sending him, it's like sending his own heart (v. 12).

Paul's dealings with Philemon apply especially to any relationship where you are in authority. Although there are times with your children when you must say, "Obey because I said so," that should not be your primary means of relating to them. I've heard parents snap at their children and order them around like the family dog. Then they wonder why their kids aren't overwhelmed with warm feelings toward them as parents, especially "after all I've done for you!" It's better to appeal on the basis of love and save the commands for situations that have really serious consequences.

5. Don't presume upon a relationship for your advantage.

Paul really wanted Onesimus to stay with him, because he was in a difficult situation and Onesimus was providing valuable service to Paul. He could have rationalized, "Philemon would probably let Onesimus stay if he were aware of my situation. I'll just keep him here." But he didn't want to presume on Philemon's generosity.

It's easy for pastors to fall into this trap. I once read of a pastor who got together for lunch with a man in his church. The time came when the man needed to get back to work, so he asked the pastor, "What did you want?" The pastor said, "I just wanted to see how you're doing." The man was surprised and replied, "That's the first time any church leader has ever made an appointment with me when he didn't want me to do something for him!"

There is a legitimate sense of meeting with someone to challenge him to a needed ministry or job in the church. The person may not be aware of the need and of how his particular gifts could fit the ministry unless you tell him. But you cross a line if you try to use people to accomplish your objectives. The proper focus is to encourage people to use their gifts for God's purpose and glory.

6. Use tact.

Some people say, "I just say what I mean," as if bluntness and insensitivity were virtues. They are not, to put it bluntly! While we need to be clear in communicating our desires, we should be careful to say it in a sensitive, tactful manner.

Note how Paul proceeds to build his case for Philemon to accept Onesimus. First, he begins, as we've seen, by stating his appreciation for Philemon's love and faith. He moves from the general to the particular: "You've shown love to all the saints. Now, here is a new saint for you to love."

Then, Paul paints this touching portrait of himself as the aged prisoner. He makes his appeal, but he doesn't mention Onesimus by name until verse 10 (in Greek, Onesimus is the last word in the sentence). He goes on to describe the change in Onesimus (v. 11) and his own sense of loss in sending him back to Philemon (vv. 12-14). Finally, he softens the story by suggesting the overruling hand of God's providence in the whole turn of events. He begins verse 15 with the word "perhaps." He is saying, "Consider this perspective." He does not say, "for this reason Onesimus ran away," but rather, "was parted from you" (using a passive verb). He is not absolving Onesimus of blame, but neither is he magnifying his crime so as to stir up resentment in Philemon. Then, finally (v. 17), he gets around to his request, that Philemon accept Onesimus even as he would accept Paul. It's a great lesson in diplomacy or tact!

7. Be willing to bear the cost of a relationship.

There is always a cost involved in maintaining good relationships. Somehow, we've gotten the unrealistic idea that if the chemistry is right, good relationships just happen spontaneously without any effort. But in all good relationships, there is a price tag.

Paul's cost was twofold: First, he was willing to part with Onesimus in spite of his own needs. Second, he was willing to pay for any costs that Onesimus had incurred towards Philemon. Some have said, in light of Paul's rather humorous reminder (v. 19) that Philemon owes him his very self and from the fact that Paul was poor and in prison, that he didn't really expect to pay. But I think Paul was sincere in wanting Philemon to view Onesimus' debt as Paul's debt. As Onesimus' father in the faith, he wanted to provide for his child.

Philemon also incurred some costs. He lost a slave and his labor for a while, along with whatever cash and property that Onesimus had stolen. He had to bear these costs in order to forgive Onesimus. Also, there was the cost of his reputation in town when

he forgave Onesimus. Other slave owners would have criticized him for setting a dangerous precedent.

And, of course, Onesimus had to bear a cost to return to Philemon. He had to part from his dear mentor, Paul. He had to be willing to give up his freedom and perhaps work to make restitution. Godly relationships always come with a price tag!

That price tag is usually called “forgiveness.” Forgiveness means that you bear the hurt and the one who wronged you goes free. I was once counseling with a couple that had a long history of one hurting the other and then the other retaliating. Then they got saved, but they were still bitter. We were getting nowhere. Finally, I said, “Look, each of you keeps bringing up all of these hurts from the past. We could keep dredging up the past for years to come. Or, you could choose to forgive one another.” I asked the husband if he would forgive his wife for all of these wrongs. He thought about it a moment and said that he would. I asked her the same question. She stewed about it for a while and then blurted, “If I forgive him, he goes free!”

I said, “Yes, that is what Jesus did for you. He bore the penalty you deserved and you went free.” But, she wouldn’t do it. At that point, I couldn’t help them.

But when we bear the cost, whether monetary or the cost of forgiveness, we always get more in return than we gave. Philemon received back this now useful slave, not just as a slave, but also as a brother. Onesimus now was able to serve out of joy in the Lord. The church welcomed a valuable member.

8. Expect the best and follow through to make sure that it’s done.

Paul expected Philemon’s obedience and even more (v. 21). But at the same time, he knew that people often do what you inspect, not just what you expect. So he mentions that he will be coming for a visit soon (v. 22). I don’t think that this implied a lack of trust on Paul’s part, but it did add a measure of accountability. Paul hoped to be there soon, and he would be able to tell whether Philemon and the church had forgiven and accepted Onesimus.

This principle also applies to rearing your children. Expect them to do their best to please you. Do you show surprise when they do well or when they mess up? You should expect them to do

well, but be surprised if they disobey. Don't expect your teenagers to rebel. Expect them to follow the Lord. Then follow through with reasonable accountability.

9. Make the person feel included on the team.

Paul mentions all of these other believers that greet Philemon (v. 23). On the one hand, he is just being friendly, but on the other hand, he's letting Philemon know that he's on a bigger team. If he drops the ball with Onesimus, it will affect the entire team.

In the local church, we will be more careful about restoring our relationships if we keep in mind that we're all on the same team. We cannot serve Christ by ourselves. We can't afford to say to anyone, "I don't need you on the team." Besides, it's not my team. If the Lord has picked someone for His team, then I need to include the person and work through relational problems.

10. Never forget God's grace toward you.

Paul begins and ends (vv. 3, 25) by mentioning God's grace, and it was more than a polite formality. As I recently pointed out, God's grace was at the center of Paul's life. It summed up everything about how he related to God and to others. If we have been shown grace, then we need to show grace to others. If we want to be shown more grace, then we've got to give more grace to others. Philemon may have thought, "Onesimus doesn't deserve forgiveness!" Precisely! Grace is always undeserved. Don't ever forget it!

Conclusion

You've probably heard the little ditty, "To dwell above with the saints we love, O that will be glory! But to dwell below with the saints we know, well, that's a different story!" That's why we need to learn how to relate in a godly way that glorifies God and shows the reality of the gospel in our lives. This short letter to Philemon leaves us with the question, "How are your relationships?"

Application Questions

1. Think of one person to whom you need to express your appreciation this week. Do it!
2. Is there a difference between liking someone and loving him (or her)? If so, what is it? Must we *like* everyone in the church?
3. Why is it important to see God's glory as the primary reason to work at restoring broken relationships? What implications does this have?
4. How would you counsel someone who was finding it difficult to forgive someone else? What biblical principles apply?

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