

We Are Family

Philemon 1-3

Introduction: 1) In 1979 (we had been married for one year) the singing group “Sister Sledge” released a dance hit entitled, “We Are Family.” It would eventually go Gold, rise to be the #1 R&B song on the US charts, and become the theme song for the 1979 World Series Champions, the Pittsburgh Pirates.

2) A portion of the lyrics:

We are family
I got all my sisters with me
We are family
Get up ev’rybody and sing.

Ev’ryone can see we’re together
As we walk on by
(FLY!) and we fly just like birds of a feather
I won’t tell no lie
(All!) all of the people around us they say
Can they be that close
Just let me state for the record
We’re giving love in a family dose.

“We’re giving love in a family dose!” Could that not be, should that not be, a theme that characterizes a very particular family, the family of God? I think we would all agree the answer is yes, and in Paul’s shortest letter, a letter we call the epistle to Philemon, we see this lived out in a real life situation, one that apparently involved betrayal, theft, slavery, God’s providence and gospel reconciliation.

3) Philemon is a letter written by Paul while he was a prisoner under house arrest (v. 1, 9), during what is called his 1st Roman imprisonment (see Acts 28:30-31).

The date would be c. A.D. 60-63, the same timeframe when he writes Ephesians, Philippians and Colossians. Some have referred to Philemon and Colossians as “sister apostles,” since Philemon apparently lived in Colossae and the two letters probably arrived at the same time.

4) This brief 25-verse letter is unique in the writings of Paul. Though addressed to Philemon of Colossae, it is not, strictly speaking, a private letter as its content reveals. Yet, it is occasioned by a personal problem that the Apostle hopes to resolve. The letter provides an interesting glimpse into the Apostle Paul’s strategy in handling personal issues as they impact the lives of his converts in the family of God. Philemon is one of the five one-chapter books of the Bible, the other four being Obadiah, II and III John, and Jude.

5) The book is about a slave (Onesimus) who ran away from his master (Philemon). Onesimus ran to Rome where he providentially came in contact with Paul and was converted (v. 10). Paul now sends Onesimus back to Philemon with a letter which asks the master to forgive his former slave who is now his brother in Christ (v. 16).

6) This letter then is a family letter and personal appeal by Paul to Philemon asking him to unconditionally forgive and receive back his slave Onesimus without

penalty (v. 17). Before he was a slave, but now he is a beloved brother (v. 16). Before he was useless but now he is useful to all (v. 11). Paul is so passionate that they be reconciled, he states he will personally be responsible for any debts Onesimus has incurred (v. 18). We do not know why Onesimus ran away or if he took anything from his master. It sounds like he did. All we know about is the conversion of Onesimus and Paul's appeal. Since a slave was subject to severe discipline for running away, even death, Paul's appeal is a kind and gracious act on behalf of Onesimus.

7) Dealing with a problem arising out of the institution of slavery, this epistle has figured prominently in debate surrounding that issue. It has been confidently appealed to both by those who sanctioned slavery as well as those who advocated its abolition. While it is true that the words of the Apostle here cannot be construed to advocate the abolition of slavery, the spirit of the epistle has definitely supported that position. The manner in which Paul treats the problem of Onesimus indicates the way in which Christianity confronted the evils of human society. To have directly denounced the institution of human slavery would have been problematic. It would have precipitated an immediate conflict between Rome and Christianity. It would have marked Christianity as being anti-social, and would have turned all the powers of the Empire against it. Instead of making a frontal attack upon the institution of slavery, Christianity inculcated a spirit of love, grace,

compassion, and consideration which ultimately meant the death-knell of that evil institution. That anyone claiming the name of Jesus Christ could advocate slavery is simply another indictment of our depravity and wickedness.

8) Philemon is a marvelous example of the use of mitigated exhortation, what we might call “gentle arm twisting!” Indeed, as a type of hortatory (exhortation) discourse, it contains the three salient components of 1) problem, 2) command, and 3) motivation. However, Paul mitigates the command to the final position of the text. This is borne out by the fact that there is not a single imperative in vv. 1-16, but in verse 17-20 there are three imperatives which rapidly follow one another (a fourth is in v. 22). Verse 17, therefore, is the key to the book where Paul says to Philemon, “Receive him (Onesimus) as you would receive me.” Paul employs psychological and spiritual tact while at the same time not sacrificing his apostolic authority. He also grounds his request in the gospel as we will see in verses 17-20. The analogy is too obvious to miss! Philemon then is an insightful guide as to how believers might go about the task of meditating conflicts within the family of God. As an instruction manual in resolving personal difficulties between Christians, this short epistle is of great value. Tychicus probably accompanied Onesimus back to Philemon as he returned from Paul with the letter of Colossians (cf. Col 4:7-9). The family has an important issue it must deal with. Let’s see how Paul gets the conversation stated.

I. We serve by divine appointment**v. 1**

Christians are new creations in Christ (2 Cor. 5:17). Saved by grace thru faith in the perfect atoning work of Jesus, we have a new identification. This new identification impacts both our position and also our posture. Both are given to us by Christ. All who follow Jesus are His children saved for service. Our standing is the same, we all are adopted children into one family (Rom. 8:16-17; Gal. 4:5-7). However, our service is specific and particular, taking different forms. It is by divine appointment and providence. We should as readily embrace it and we enjoy the former.

1) Know who you are

- It is interesting and instructive to see how Paul designates himself in his letters. Nine times he says he is apostle (Rom. 1:1; 1 Cor. 1:1; 2 Cor. 1:1; Gal. 1:1; Eph. 1:1; Col. 1:1; 1 Tim. 1:1; 2 Tim. 1:1; Titus 1:1). Three times he calls himself a slave (Rom. 1:1; Phil. 1:1; Titus 1:1). He was a happy spiritual slave sent with delegated authority by his Master, King Jesus. However, here in Philemon, he does something totally different.

- Paul self identifies himself as a “prisoner.” It is the only in Philemon that he begins a letter in this way, though there are other places in his letters where he makes his incarceration known (cf. v. 9, 10, 13, 23; Eph. 3:1; 4:1; Phil. 1:7, 13, 14; Col. 4:18) [Garland, *NIVAC*, 315]. However, what is interesting is whose prisoner he is! He is a prisoner of or “for” (*ESV*) Christ Jesus. Paul may appear to be a prisoner of Caesar Nero (A.D. 54-68), but he is, in a deeper sense, a prisoner of Messiah, King Jesus (Moo, *Pillar*, 380). Paul is here, under house arrest awaiting trial, by divine appointment and providence. It is no accident. It is not an unfortunate circumstance of life. It is not bad luck! He knows who he is and whose he is. He is here “for the gospel” (v. 13). The political powers of the day might deceive themselves into thinking they are in control but they are not. William Hendriksen says it beautifully, “all the details of the imprisonment as well as its outcome, whether it be the death sentence or acquittal, are in the hands that were pierced for this prisoner, those very hands that now control the entire universe in the interest of the church (Eph. 1:22)” [*NTC*, Col./Phil., 209].

2) Know who you please

- Paul is a prisoner “of Christ Jesus.” He was not a prisoner for just anyone. He was a prisoner for this one, “Messiah Savior,” his Messiah

Savior. Having been purchased, redeemed by his blood (Rom. 3:24-25; Eph. 1:7) he knew who his Master was. He knew who his King was.

- Life can get terribly complicated and confusing if we lose sight of who it is we must strive to please. This is especially true for those in ministry, but it is also true for those in politics, business and athletics. Divided allegiances can easily entrap us, often followed by anxiety, high blood pressure and ulcers. Settle in your heart and in your soul, once and for all, that you will live by a very simple life principle: “All that truly matters in life is that I please Jesus.” The fact is you cannot please everybody so stop trying. Don’t try and please everybody. Strive to please Somebody! And, make sure that Somebody is Jesus (cf. Gal. 1:10).

II. We serve with dedicated partners

vs. 1-2

- Paul had a gift when it comes to describing the members of the family of God. His descriptions are varied and sometimes colorful. They are also insightful in what God does in us thru the gospel of Jesus Christ. When our God saves us from sin, He does so for a purpose. For some of us, His plan is quite simple. There is nothing all that spectacular or unusual (see the book of Ruth). For others the assignment God has is more public, visible. Still others are called to a life of very hard work and even danger. All of this is

God's choosing not ours. What we can do is rejoice in the dedicated partners within the family of God with whom we work side by side for the expansion of the gospel across the globe. In verses 1&2 Paul gives us a snapshot of some of those partners.

1) We serve with brothers v. 1

- Paul informs Philemon that Timothy, his son in the faith (cf. 1 Tim. 1:2; 2 Tim. 1:2), is with him. The inclusion of his name would indicate his support of Paul in the "Onesimus affair." Further, it is likely Timothy knows Philemon. Some think Timothy, though not the author of Philemon, may have served as Paul's amanuensis or secretary for the letter. That is possible but not certain.
- Paul simply calls Timothy "our brother" (lit. "the brother"). He, through Christ, is part of the family. D. Edmond Hiebert notes that, "The designation of Timothy as "brother" would also remind Philemon of that great brotherhood of all believers into which he himself had been brought at his own conversion. It was this very spirit of brotherhood, engendered by faith in Christ, which Paul confidently expected to work a kindly reception for Onesimus in the heart of Philemon" (*Everyman's Bible Com.*, 89).

2) We serve with fellow workers

v. 2

- Philemon, whose name means “affectionate,” is the primary recipient of this letter. He appears to have been a resident of the small town of Colossae based on Colossians 4:9, 17. He was wealthy enough to have slaves and a house in which the church could meet. He had come to Christ thru the ministry of Paul (v. 19).
- Paul describes him as “our dear friend and coworker.” The words “dear friend” is literally “beloved.” Philemon was both a much loved brother in Christ as well as a fellow laborer for the gospel.
- Doug Moo points out, “Paul can use fellow worker to denote Christians in general (2 Cor. 1:24) but generally applies this designation only to people who have worked closely with him in significant ministry (Rom. 16:3, 9, 21; 1 Cor. 3:9; 2 Cor. 8:23; Phil. 2:25; 4:3; Col. 4:11; 1 Thess. 3:2; Phlm. 24). [Pillar, 381]. It is quite obvious the family of God needs a lot of fellow workers if it is to function and work effectively. We need a lot of Philemons!

3) We serve with sisters v. 2

- Apphia was probably Philemon’s wife. Her name means “endearment.” It is easy to think she had been active in serving Jesus alongside her husband. I can envision her as a Titus 2 woman mentoring younger women to grow in grace and maturity in the Lord.

- Church tradition says she was stoned to death, along with her husband, during the reign of Nero, for her faith in Jesus.

4) We serve with fellow soldiers v. 2

- The Bible does not shy away from using military images to describe the Christian life. We are in a war “against the rulers, against the authorities, against the world powers of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavens” (Eph. 6:12). We must think and live as those in death and life warfare for the souls of men and women.
- Paul, therefore, refers to Archippus as “our fellow soldier.” The only other person Paul calls a “fellow soldier” is Epaphroditus (Phil. 2:25). Archippus was a spiritual military man, a green beret for the gospel. He also was probably the son of Philemon and Apphia. He is mentioned in Colossians 4:17 where he is challenged to, “Pay attention to the ministry you have received from the Lord, so that you can accomplish it.” Those who follow King Jesus as Commander-in-Chief are called to be soldiers not civilians. We are warriors for his glory not spectators sitting on the sidelines of the battlefield.
- Church tradition says this valiant warrior for Christ was stabbed to death by a mob during the time of Nero. Like many soldiers of the cross, he apparently died on the battlefield of faith.

5) We serve with a community of believers v. 2

- Paul concludes verse 2 by noting “the church that meets in your home.”

It is interesting to discover that there is no evidence for church buildings of any magnitude until the 3rd century. Apparently the early church turned the world upside down without elaborate buildings, budgets and programs. The New Testament provides numerous references to house churches and their hosts:

Gaius at Rome (Rom. 16:23)

Nympha at Laodicia (Col. 4:15)

Aquila and Priscilla at Ephesus (1 Cor. 16:19)

Philemon at Colossae (Philemon 2)

Aquila and Priscilla at Rome (Rom. 16:3, 5)

Mary at Jerusalem (Acts 12:12)

Lydia at Philippi (Acts 16:15, 40)

Jason at Thessalonica (Acts 17:5-6)

- Tim Keller points out that Christianity spread in the first century through extended household evangelism done informally by Christians. He writes: “The home could be used for systematic teaching and instruction (Acts 5:42), planned presentations of the Gospel to friends and neighbors (Acts 10:22), prayer meetings (Acts 12:12), impromptu

evangelistic gatherings (Acts 16:32), follow-up sessions with inquiries (Acts 18:26), evenings devoted to instruction and prayer (Acts 20:7), and fellowship (Acts 21:7). (*Center Church*, 278). Apparently the early church, like many churches around the world today, did just fine with simple, basic essentials. Just like a healthy family today.

III. We serve by divine enablement

v. 3

- For those acquainted with the letters of Paul, verse 3 has a very familiar ring. And, it is that familiarity that can cause us to lose the wonder and miss the impact of what is here. Grace, peace, a God who is Father, these were radical ideas in Paul's day. They are becoming increasingly radical ideas in our own. The same, sadly, can be said for Jesus as Lord and Christ. First Corinthians 1:23 says, "But we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to the Jews and foolishness to the Gentiles" (nations). Things have not changed much in almost 2000 years. Nevertheless, we faithfully keep on preaching this message for it and it alone is the power of God for salvation (Rom. 1:16).
- Verse 3 provides a double blessing from a twin source. Here is the source of supernatural enablement for the family of God.
 - 1) We are divinely enabled by our Father

- Grace, God's unmerited and undeserved favor, and peace (Heb. *Shalom*), God's gift of wholeness and well-being, flow equally (and that is important!) from God who is our Father and Jesus Christ who is our Lord (Phil. 2:9-11).
- Doug Moo's comments are really helpful here: "Grace and peace both touch on a central gospel truth (underlining mine). While grace was of course hardly absent from God's dealings with his old covenant people, it especially marks the extraordinary free and unmerited gift of his Son that stands at the center of the gospel (e.g., John 1:16; Rom. 3:24; 4:4-5; 5:2; 2 Cor. 8:9; Gal. 5:4; Eph. 1:6-7). "Peace," on the other hand, has deeper Old Testament roots, used by the prophets as a way of summarizing the universal "well-being" (*shalom*) that God would establish in the last days (see esp. Isa. 52:7; 55:12; 66:12; Jer. 30:10; 33:6; 46:27; Ezek. 34:25; 37:26; Hag. 2:9; Zech. 9:10). This "peace" has been established by God through the work of his Son (cf. Eph. 2:14-17; Col. 1:20), and so it is appropriate that Paul traces the source of both this peace and grace to God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. This, too, is the common pattern of Paul's salutations, and it implies that Paul puts Christ on the same level with God the Father." (Pillar, 384).

- Never lose sight that our God is a God who has revealed Himself as Father. And, He is a good Father, a great Father, a perfect Father. And, because there is only one Father there is only one family.

2) We are divinely enabled by our Savior

- I love what is called “the full majestic title” of our Savior! He is the Lord Jesus Christ.

Lord – focuses on His deity and sovereign rule (Matt. 28:18-20).

Jesus – focuses on His humanity and is His earthly name received at the incarnation. There was a time when Jesus was not, but there never a time when the Son was not.

Christ – He is the Messiah, the Anointed and promised One of the Old Testament.

- Paul uses the word Lord 6 times in this letter (v. 3, 5, 16, 20, 20, 25). He uses the word Jesus 6 times (v. 1, 3, 5, 6, 25). And he uses the word Christ 7 times (v. 1, 3, 6, 8, 9, 23, 25). Interestingly, he begins and ends the book using the full majestic title (v. 25). The blessings that are ours in the family of God flow fully and equally from our Father and our Lord. Those whom our God is redeeming and rescuing out of every tribe, tongue, people and nation have the same Daddy, serve the same

Lord, and are indwelt by the same Spirit. Our Triune God truly gives
 “love in a family dose!”

Conclusion

- The church, the body and bride of Christ, is not made up of very impressive people. Not really. What it is, is a very impressive family with a very, very impressive Father and Lord. In A.D. 125 a man names Aristitides wrote a letter to the emperor Hadrian describing this not so impressive ragtag band of brothers and sisters called the church. His words were insightful in the 2nd century. They are very instructive in the 21st.
- “But the Christians, O King...have found the truth...For they know and trust in God, the Creator of heaven and or earth, in whom and from whom are all things, to whom there is no other god as companion, from whom they received commandments which they engraved upon their minds and observe in hope and expectation of the world which is to come. Wherefore they do not commit adultery nor fornication, nor bear false witness, nor embezzle what is held in pledge, nor covet with is not theirs. They honour father and mother, and show kindness to those near to them; and whenever they are judges, they judge uprightly....And their oppressors they comfort and make them their friends; they do good to their enemies; and their women, O King, are pure as virgins, and their daughters are modest; and their men keep themselves from every

unlawful union and from all uncleanness, in the hope of a recompense to come in the other world. Further, if one or other of them have bondmen and bondwomen or children, through love towards them they persuade them to become Christians, and when they have done so, they call them brethren without distinction. They do not worship strange gods, and they go their way in all modesty and cheerfulness. Falsehood is not found among them; and they love one another, and from widows they do not turn away their esteem; and they deliver the orphan from him who treats him harshly. And he, who has, gives to him who has not, without boasting. And when they see a stranger, they take him in to their homes and rejoice over him as a very brother; for they do not call them brethren after the flesh, but brethren after the spirit and in God. And whenever one of their poor passes from the world, each one of them according to his ability gives heed to him and carefully sees to his burial. And if they hear that one of their number is imprisoned or afflicted on account of the name of their Messiah, all of them anxiously minister to his necessity, and if it is possible to redeem him they set him free. And if there is among them any that is poor and needy, and if they have no spare food, they fast two or three days in order to supply to the needy their lack of food. They observe the precepts of their Messiah with much care, living justly and soberly as the Lord

their God commanded them...such, O King, is the commandment of the law of the Christians, and such is their manner of life.”

- As it was for them, by God’s grace, may it be for us!