

How To Pray For The Family Of God

Philemon 4-7

Introduction: 1) In 1 Thessalonians 5:17 the apostle Paul writes very simply, “Pray constantly” (ESV, “without ceasing”). This is excellent counsel anytime. It is, however, outstanding counsel when there is a problem in the covenant community that requires wisdom, careful consideration and godly action.

2) Paul often begins his letters with a prayer for his recipients (the exceptions being 2 Cor.; Gal.; 2 Thess.; 1 Tim.; 2 Tim.; Titus). That he does so here is not surprising at all given the issue he is about to address: the return of a runaway slave to his master.

3) Paul’s prayer, no doubt, is genuine and authentic as he praises Philemon for his love and faith (v. 4). He is grateful for a brother who is a great source of joy, comfort and refreshment (v. 7). At the same time, it is a marvelous example of tact and wisdom as he sets the table for his request on behalf of Onesimus (v. 10). Paul wants to say the right thing but to do so in the right way. Beginning with prayer is seldom a foolish or unwise strategy.

4) Paul’s prayer provides a worthy model and pattern for us (see the model prayer of Jesus in Matt. 6:9-13). We can learn and see the kinds of things we should pray for in the church. Paul rightly begins with God, but he also looks to the life of Philemon and identifies several character traits for which he can praise and thank

God. This is the atmosphere and context he wants to establish before confronting the important issue that must be faced.

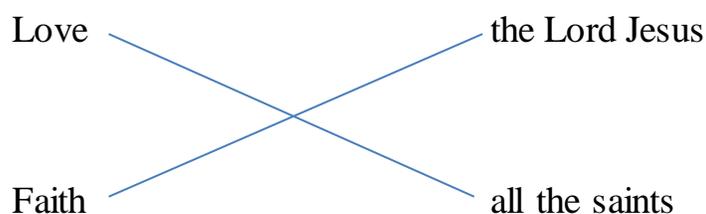
5) There is a story (legend?) that the famous New Testament scholar A.T. Robertson deeply offended a Tennessee mountain man one day in class. Robertson indeed had a reputation for being brutal and rigorous with his students. After class this mountain man, who was a mountain of a man himself, went to Robertson's office and told the great scholar he was there to whip him for embarrassing him in class. Robertson said he understood but had one request before this important event took place: might they pray first before the whipping commenced! His student agreed and so they got on their knees and Robertson began to pray...and pray...and pray! It is said he prayed for an hour! Eventually the anger of his student withered away. Robertson apologized, agreed not to embarrass him again, and spared himself a whipping! Prayer should often, always, precede important and difficult decision. Robertson understood this! So did Paul. How, then, did Paul pray for Philemon as the moment of truth for Onesimus was about to arrive?

I. Thank God for the good things you hear v. 4-5

- In this verse Paul is extremely personal. He addresses "my God" and it is "my prayers." And, he helps us understand what it means to pray without ceasing, at least in part. He "always" thanks God for Philemon each and every time he goes to God in prayer. It was not hard to pray for his "dear

friend and coworker” (v. 11), because he was a faithful brother who was a constant blessing to everyone (v. 5, 7). In anticipation of his request for Onesimus, he wants Philemon to know that he knows all the good things Philemon is doing.

- Verse 5 is an example of what is called a chiasm. It follows an ABB’A’ structure or that of an X. It looks like this:



Because of Philemon’s love for his family and faith in his Lord (cf. Col. 1:4; also Eph. 1:15), the apostle Paul is hopeful for a positive response to the “Onesimus Affair.” Paul is hearing good things and he is hoping for even better things from this man of God.

1) We honor God by our love for one another

- Philemon was known as a “lovin man!” His love was not narrow or restrictive. It was broad and encompassing. It was for “all the saints.” Philemon’s love must have been multifaceted as Christian love always is (1 Cor. 13:4-8). It brought joy, encouragement and refreshment (v. 7) and much more to everyone. Real love flowing from Christ in us to others always does!

- In a simple one page article entitled, “Love Is...”, Allen Rae identifies nothing less than 24 “Practical Manifestations of Love From the Epistle to Philemon.” (*Uplook*, Sept. 98, p. 21). Asking God to cultivate and manifest these characteristics within the Body of Christ goes a long ways in building a healthy, spiritual family. Here is his list.
- LOVE IS...
 - 1) Respectful – “Timothy, our brother”; “Philemon, our dear friend (beloved).” v. 1
 - 2) Humble – “Archippus...fellow soldier; Mark, Demas, Luke...coworkers. v. 2, 24
 - 3) Appreciative – “I always thank my God...” v. 4a
 - 4) Constant – “I mention you [always] in my prayers.” v. 4b
 - 5) Responsive – “I hear of your love and faith toward the Lord Jesus and for all the saints.” v. 5
 - 6) Benevolent – “knowing every good thing which is in us...” v. 6b
 - 7) Fulfilling – “I have great joy and encouragement from your love.” v. 7a
 - 8) Reciprocal – “the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you, brother.” v. 7b
 - 9) Gentle – “I have great boldness in Christ...I appeal to you, instead, on the basis of love” v. 8, 9
 - 10) Exhortive – “[I] appeal to you for my son, Onesimus...” v. 10a

- 11) Evangelistic – “I fathered him while I was in chains.” v. 10b
- 12) Perceptive – “he was...useless, but now he is useful both to you and to me.” v. 11
- 13) Tender – “I am sending him back to you as a part of myself.” v. 12
- 14) Honest – “I wanted to keep him with me.” v. 13
- 15) Righteous – “I didn’t want to do anything without your consent.” v. 14
- 16) Tackful – “for perhaps...he was separated from you for a brief time.” v. 15a
- 17) Hopeful – “that you might get him back permanently as a dearly loved brother.” v. 15b, 16
- 18) Gracious – “If you consider me a partner, accept him as you would me.” v. 17
- 19) Generous – “If he has wronged you, owes you anything, charge that to my account.” v. 18
- 20) Humorous – “I will repay...not to mention you owe me even your own self.” v. 19
- 21) Uplifting – “I am confident of your obedience...” v. 21a
- 22) Expectant – “knowing that you will do even more than I say.” v. 21b
- 23) Hospitable – “prepare a guest room...” v. 22a
- 24) Supportive – “for I hope that through your prayers I will be restored to you.” v. 22b

(Slightly adapted)

2) We honor God by our faith in His Son

- Paul uses the present tense when he says that “he hears” of Philemon’s “love for all the saints” and his “faith in the Lord Jesus.” He continually hears these good reports (Moo, 387).
- Philemon loved his brothers and sisters in Christ. I have no doubt such love was grounded in and flowed from the faith he had in the Lord Jesus. The gospel of the Lord Jesus received by faith in Christ’s perfect atoning work cannot help but work itself out in tangible acts of love towards others. God given faith is active, dynamic, it does things! David Garland is right on target when he says, “Faith in Christ is the impetus for love for others, and together they make one a Christian. Missing either faith in Christ or love for others renders any claim to be Christian a deadly lie (see 1 John 3:10). Paul notes that Philemon’s love is directed to all the saints. He does not discriminate, which suggests that he would not exclude from his love slaves who are in Christ” (*NIVAC*, 319).
- We should work hard at giving authentic praise to our brothers and sisters for the good things we see God doing in their lives. It will bless and encourage them, something we all need. It will also inspire and motivate them to keep on keeping on.

II. Ask God to help them grow in the knowledge of all we have in Christ v. 6

- I think we all must admit that the prayers we too often hear in our churches do not sound a whole lot like the prayers we read in the Bible. It is not that our prayers are bad or wrong, but they may lack the substance we see in Scripture. Paul has thanked God for the way Philemon loves his brothers and sisters. He has praised God for the faith Philemon has in the Lord Jesus. Now, he asks God to give him something more, something the *ESV* calls “full knowledge” (Gr. *epignosei*). Though the specifics of the verse are a bit tricky (Moo says, “This verse is universally recognized as the most difficult in Philemon, p. 389), the general thrust is clear and the practical wisdom we find is extremely helpful.

1) We grow as we participate in our common faith

- Paul moves from the thanksgiving component of prayer in v. 5 to the intercessory component in v. 6. Actually the words “I pray” are not in verse 6 in the Greek text, “but is supplied from verse 4 to show that this verse is dependent on verse 4, not verse 5” (Garland, *NIVAC*, 319). Our English translators did a good job by doing this.
- His prayer is that Onesimus’ “participation (*ESV*, “sharing,” *NASV*, “fellowship”) in the faith may become effective through knowing (*ESV*, “for the full knowledge”) every good thing that is in us...”

- I think Paul's point is something like this. As those who share fellowship (*koinonia*), common life in the blessings of the gospel, we should pray that our faith will be effective in this very context. It will actually work and produce the fruit ("every good thing") that is the natural result and outgrowth of the gospel lived out in community. Moo puts it well, "When people believe in Christ, they become identified with one another in an intimate association and incur both the benefits and responsibilities of that communion" (392).
- The Onesimus affair is going to stretch Philemon, there is no doubt about it. This is going to be an uncomfortable situation for him and his church family. This is uncharted territory for this small congregation, and Paul prays that their common bond (fellowship, perfection) and knowledge of all that they have in Christ will be their guide, will be that which energized the manner in which they handle this issue. Let their common faith be the fuel that guides the heart and enlightens the mind of this spiritual family as they conduct God's business.

2) We grow as we do good things for Christ

- Knowledge without action is useless. It might be harmful. "Faith without works" James tells us, "is dead" (Jam. 2:26). To truly "know" in the biblical sense is to "both possess and perform" (Lightfoot, 336), it is to

understand and act. Paul wants Philemon to act on his knowledge of our common life in Christ and do something, that which he calls “every good thing.” Of course every good thing is about to become a specific good thing! If Philemon is committed to every good thing, and Paul is confident he is, he will respond well to Onesimus “for the glory of Christ” (lit. “for Christ”).

- Moo paraphrases well the gist of Paul’s argument, “Philemon, I am praying that the mutual participation that arises from your faith in Christ might become effective in leading you to understand and put into practice all the good that God wills for us and that is found in our community’ and do all this for the sake of Christ” (394).
- And, Richard Melick, Jr. spells out clearly what is on Paul’s heart and what is at stake with the request that will soon come in v. 10: “Paul prayed that Philemon would use this knowledge to work out the implications of his faith in the matter with Onesimus. The “good thing” he knew to do was to forgive an erring and repentant brother who sinned before his salvation. Such a reconciliation would have far-reaching implications in the whole church. It watched this test case with great interest. If Christianity could work in such tension-filled relationships, it could work anywhere. Paul, Philemon, Onesimus, the church, and all of Christianity

had much at stake in Philemon's response. Paul prayed that Philemon would make the correct choice" (*NAC*, 355).

III. Rejoice in their acts of love that bless others v. 7

- Church life is not about entertaining others, it is about serving others. You see entertainment is usually about the host. Hospitality on the other hand, is always about the guest. Entertainment is easily seduced by the shallow and superficial. It is only surface deep. Hospitality, rooted in our common fellowship in Christ, has authenticity and depth and significance that is truly meaningful and long lasting.
- This servant mind was evident in the life of Philemon. Paul had heard about it and the church at Colossae had seen it on full display. This servant mindset will soon be tested, but because of what Paul already knew, the blessing that Philemon was to others, he was confident it would be extended to Onesimus as well.
- Three things are highlighted in Paul's prayer concerning how Philemon was a blessing to others. How wonderful it would be if the same things are said about us.

1) Be a source of joy

- Paul tells Philemon he has great (*ESV*, "much") joy from his love. The word "for" ties v. 7 back to v. 4 where the theme of love was

introduced, but it also anticipates what is to follow. And note, it is great joy that Paul derives from Philemon's love for "all the saints" (v. 5).

This joy overflows.

- Paul hopes to be encouraged by this brother again by the way he receives and treats another brother, one he describes as nothing less than "a dearly loved brother" (v. 16). Philemon has brought joy to Paul in the past and in the present. Is future joy just around the corner?

2) Be a source of encouragement

- Paul's great joy in Philemon is accompanied by great encouragement (*ESV; NASV*, "comfort"). E. Edmond Hiebert says, "The news of Philemon's love had animated the apostle (Moule). It had sent a beam of happiness into his dreary imprisonment and had given him encouragement in his bondage." (*Everyman's Bible Comm.*, Titus and Philemon, 88).
- In a time of his life where he could easily have given in to disappointment, discouragement and even depression, Paul's spirits were lifted and his heart was allowed to sing with joy because of this godly servant. More joy to follow? More encouragement too?!

3) Be a source of refreshment

- Paul concludes this short, but important, prayer by telling his dear friend Philemon he has refreshed the hearts of the saints (the holy and set apart ones who follow Christ). Two words are important for our reflection: “heart” and “refreshed”.
- The word “heart” is used by Paul 8 times in his letters with 3 of those occurrences appearing in this short letter (vs. 7, 12, 20 in the Gr. text). The Bible often uses the word “heart” to describe not the physical organ beating in your chest, but the real you, who you are on the inside. Here it has that meaning addressing the “seat of the emotions”, the “total personality at the deepest level” (Moo, 397). All of a person’s behavior, emotions, feelings and speech, everything you really are, flows from the heart. Sometimes I will say, “I love my wife Charlotte with all my heart!” I mean by that I love her with all that I am! That captures something of what Paul meant. The totality of the saints had been refreshed by Philemon.
- “Refreshed” is a very interesting word, and one that Paul strategically uses 2 times in this letter (v. 7, 20). It is a verb in the perfect tense indicating that the hearts of the saints have been and are still being refreshed (Murray Harris, *Exegetical Guide to the Greek New*

Testament, 219). John MacArthur says refreshed is “a military term that speaks of an army resting from a march. Philemon brought troubled people rest and renewal; he was a peacemaker” (p. 215).

Philemon’s servant heart had served the heart of others and encouraged them. His influence and ministry went deep and made an impact.

- Paul ends the prayer again using the word brother (v. 1, 7, 16, 20), perhaps as a point of emphasis. In all matters Philemon had again and again shown himself to be a true brother. His past performance had been stellar. However, his greatest test is about to unfold. Had the Lord been preparing him, as He does us, for this very moment?!

Conclusion: 1) The International Justice Ministry (IJM) is a wonderful organization that seeks to help the hurting and disenfranchised around the world. They are particularly active in confronting the evil world of sex slave trade. (Their website address is www.ijm.org). Concerning their vital work the ministry says, “The first work of justice is the work of prayer.” Amazing isn’t it? Among the many good things they do, that which they deem to be the most important is the work of prayer. I suspect they got this from the Bible and learned it in the fiery furnace of experience.

2) Prayerlessness gives evidence of our belief in our own self-sufficiency. Prayer gives evidence of our need of divine dependency. Courageous humility will flow

from a life of communion, prayer, with our heavenly Father as we hear His heart and then do His work. This is the example of Jesus. This is the example of Paul. I would say, under much conviction, these are footprints we should, we must, seek to follow. Adrian Rogers, a wonderful pastor now in heaven said, “God gave you His unlisted phone number and invites you to get in touch with Him anytime.” What a wonderful truth to know. What a wonderful truth to put into practice.