

## How To Resolve Conflicts In The Family of God

### Philemon 8-16

**Introduction:** 1) In ministry, and in life for that matter, few things are more important, more valuable, than knowing how to say the right thing. I will often remind my students we need to learn how to say the right thing, in the right way, at the right time and to the right person. Each component is essential, and to be absent of any, can often cause disappointment and failure.

2) The Bible understands the importance of this issue and repeatedly addresses it.

Just note a few examples:

-Proverbs 10:32 -The lips of the righteous know what is appropriate, but the mouth of the wicked, only what is perverse.

-Proverbs 12:18 -There is one who speaks rashly, like a piercing sword; but the tongue of the wise brings healing.

-Proverbs 15:1 -A gentle answer turns away anger, but a harsh word stirs up wrath.

-Proverbs 15:29 -The LORD is far from the wicked, but He hears the prayer of the righteous.

-Proverbs 15:23 -A man takes joy in giving an answer, and a timely word—how good that is!

-Proverbs 16:21 -Anyone with a wise heart is called discerning, and pleasant speech increases learning.

-Proverbs 16:24 -Pleasant words are a honeycomb: sweet to the taste and health to the body.

-Proverbs 25:11 -A word spoken at the right time is like gold apples on a silver tray.

3) We have come to the moment of truth in the Philemon and Onesimus affair.

After setting things up as best he can, Paul is prepared to ask this slave owner to forgive his runaway slave and receive him back, “no longer as a slave, but more than a slave – as a dearly loved brother” (v.16). Paul is a model of tact as he makes his appeal. He is also convinced that the power of the gospel is real and that it works. Not only can it change our broken relationship with God, it can also change and heal our broken relationships with one another.

4) A delicate situation needs to be handled in a delicate manner. What we see in Philemon 8-16 are some of the wisest principles we can employ when attempting to reconcile estranged parties. There is even wisdom here for sharing the gospel and doing missions. They are especially helpful in showing us how to address the wounded party and the one in the position of power and authority; the one in the position of advantage. My friend Rick Warren says, “The purpose of influence is to speak for those who have no influence.” Well, let’s watch Paul go to work and do exactly that very thing.

## **I. Remember the gospel principle of humility vv. 8-9**

1) It is never right to be rude. It is never right for those who follow Jesus to be arrogant, abrasive, uncouth. “Obnoxious for Jesus” is not a badge of honor, even if you may be in the right. Our evangelism would be more effective if we would remember this. So would our marriage and family life.

2) Paul will now make his appeal to Philemon on behalf of Onesimus. His use of tact is amazing, and not surprising, he begins with a spirit of humility. A good definition of tact may go something like this: “it is a skill which, without any sacrifice of honesty or truth, enables a person to say the right word at the right time in the right way, and to do the right thing in the right way in any given situation.” Now, this is a skill we should all covet and envy! It is a skill beautifully put on display by Paul. As Paul begins his humble appeal, he makes sure to do two things. What wisdom we see as he begins.

### 1) Do not pull rank v.8

1) Paul now moves into the body of his letter and his main point, signaled by the phrase “For this reason” (ESV, “Accordingly;” NASV, “Therefore”). Looking back to Philemon’s “love for all the saints” (v.4), Paul will ground his appeal, his request, in love (v.9). Further, he will not take advantage of his position as an apostle and pull rank. He does have “great boldness [all speech] in Christ” and

could “command” you [Philemon] to do what is right,” but that would be coercive and coerced love is a contradiction.

2) Paul wants Philemon to do the right thing for the right reason. He is concerned about what motivates his decision, his heart. He is also concerned about how all this will affect the covenant community.

Moo provides helpful insight at this point: “The contrast is between Paul’s apostolic authority and what we might call the “moral” authority arising from the *koinōnia* that exists between Paul and Philemon (v.6). Our relationships to one another in Christ create expectations and impose obligations that cannot be ignored and that often go far beyond what any “law” might impose. Love is foundational to Christian ethics (e.g., Rom. 13:8-10; Gal. 5:13-15) and makes Christian ethics something that is open-ended, incalculable (as Jesus’ Parable of the Good Samaritan illustrates)”. (p.401). So, Paul will appeal not command. He will plead and not demand. His approach is both gracious and humble.

## 2) Do not neglect love v.9

1) Love is indeed foundational to Christian ethics, how we treat one another. So Paul is clear in his request: “I appeal to you...on the basis of love.” Interestingly, “Philemon’s name meant “the loving one.”

Paul was asking him to live up to his name and show the same loving attitude toward Onesimus that he had shown in the past to others”

(O.S. Hawkins, *Tearing Down Walls and Building Bridges*, Nelson, 80).

Paul, figuratively, walks up to Philemon, gives him a big hug, and puts his arm around him. The love that they share with one another because of Christ is the basis on which he will encourage Philemon to do the right thing.

2) Paul then “twists the arm” of Philemon a bit! It is the first time but it will not be the last! He reminds him that he is: 1) an old man (“an elderly man”) and 2) “a prisoner of Christ Jesus” (not Rome!). This puts additional pressure on Philemon. And, don’t miss how he does it! “I...Paul...an elderly man.” There is an emotional connection and impact that Paul is trying to make. It is not intended to be manipulative, but it is certainly intended to be effective! Twice helpless is Paul. He needs Philemon to show him some love! He also needs Philemon to show someone else some love too!

## **II. Remember the gospel principle of sensitivity      vv. 10-11**

1) The gospel gives us a completely new status before God. Once alienated from His love, dead spiritually and a slave to sin, we are now His child,

spiritually alive and no longer in bondage. The gospel radically changes us on the inside. This has to do with how I look to God. However, the gospel also changes us on the outside. This has to do with how we look to others.

2) The gospel then, changes us inwardly and outwardly. Paul had seen this transformation in Onesimus, but now he wants Philemon to hear about it. He is almost certain that the sound of Onesimus' name will strike a negative cord in Philemon's heart. Emotions will likely rise and flood over him and they will not be positive. Paul, therefore, moves with great care and sensitivity. Just because he believes Onesimus has changed does not mean Philemon will.

Again, his approach is incredibly wise and sensitive. For the first and only time in the book the name of Onesimus will appear. And in the Greek text, and the *HCSB*, it is placed last, as the final word, in verse 10. This was a wise and rhetorically effective strategy. It was a sensitive move to ease the impact of Philemon hearing his name. What does Paul do to ensure a positive, gospel-centered response?

1) Make a hopeful appeal v.10

- For the 2<sup>nd</sup> time in 2 verses Paul uses the word “appeal” (Gr. *parakalo*). And, the one for whom he is making his plea is 1) his spiritual son and 2) one he brought to Christ (“fathered”) while he was

imprisoned. Paul saw God's hand all over this, of that I am certain.

His hope is that Philemon will see it too!

- And, for whom specifically is he speaking? Now the bomb is dropped: it is his runaway slave Onesimus. I've often wondered if it is only now, at this point in the reading of the letter, that Onesimus steps forward and makes his presence known?! No doubt things would have been tense. Yet by his very return, Onesimus indicates he is as hopeful for reconciliation as Paul. He had by divine providence (see v. 15) met Paul and been saved. He is not the same man who ran away. He hoped Philemon believed this. Paul certainly did by what he says in verse 11.

## 2) Make an honest appeal v. 11

- Paul uses a play on words in this verse as it related to the name Onesimus, which means "useful." With complete and total honesty, sensitive to the volatility of the situation, Paul says plainly that B.C. (before Christ) Onesimus was "useless" to Philemon. He was *achrēstos*. However, the gospel has transformed him, he is now a new creation in Christ (2 Cor. 5:17). He is now "useful" (Gr. *euchrētos*). From useless to useful, from unprofitable to profitable, this man is now useful and valuable to Philemon, but also to Paul!

- Some see Paul setting the stage to ask Philemon to return Onesimus to him (see also v.13). This is certainly possible. As William Hendriksen says, “the apostle has certainly planned this statement with great care (*NTC, Colossians and Philemon, 217*). Whatever the case, we see Paul providing a very helpful model for seeking to restore broken relationships. He makes his appeal on the basis of a new family relationship. He makes his appeal on the basis of the transformation brought about by new life in Christ through the gospel. God has done a work in Onesimus. Certainly Philemon can give thanks for that. Hopefully that will help him in his reunion with Onesimus. Here is the beauty of the gospel doing its work.

### **III. Remember the gospel principle of integrity      vv. 12-13**

- Many times, too many times to be honest, people deceive themselves in thinking, “the end justifies the means.” If things end well, it doesn’t matter how we get there. This is especially tragic when done by those who call themselves Christians. Scripture is clear that God is concerned with both the means and the end. We must be committed to doing the right thing in the right way for the right reasons.
- There is no question that Paul believed this. He knew how he hoped the Onesimus affair would end. However, he was committed to absolute



integrity in how he handled the situation. As a leader (an apostle!) in the Covenant Community, he was determined to be “above reproach” (1 Tim. 3:2). How desperate we are for Christian leaders like this in our day!

1) Share your heart v. 12

- Paul is simple and straight forward: “I am sending him back to you as a part of myself.” (*ESV*, “my very heart”). The force of Paul’s words are filled with emotions and feelings. This was not an easy decision. It hurt!
- That Paul was sending him back in no way implies that Onesimus was unwilling to return. When he left Paul he could have chosen to run away again. No, he trusted Paul, a man willing to expose his own heart and lay bare his soul. Wendell Grout says, “Paul was making an appeal for Onesimus, but he was basing that request on love, not apostolic muscle” (*Colossians and Philemon*; *The Deeper Life Pulpit Commentary*, 156).
- It is not always easy to expose our heart and make ourselves vulnerable. It can be fearful, even threatening. Let’s be honest, there is a risk! However, God will use it when done as an act of integrity and not manipulation. Our homes and our churches, in particular, would be so

much more healthy if we would follow Paul's example--run the risk!

It is worth it!!

## 2) State the facts v.13

- Paul's honesty is once more a model for all of us. He straightforwardly says to Philemon, "I wanted to keep him with me." Why? "So that in my imprisonment for the gospel (only direct mention of the gospel in the letter), he might serve me in your place." The one who is now "useful" could be useful here with me on your behalf. He could serve as your substitute and I could certainly use him.
- Paul wants to keep him because he sees him as a son. He wants to keep him because he needs help. He wants to keep him to advance the gospel and the mission of the church. These, quite clearly, are the facts. Paul has a self-interest but he is not selfish. Ultimately, it's about the gospel! It is about mission! Paul has sacrificed. He is imprisoned and he has sent away a very valuable helper. He hated doing it, but he believed it was the right thing to do. These are the facts. Now what?

## IV. Remember the gospel principle of accountability v.14

- 1) It has been well said that:

The wrong action at the wrong time leads to disaster.

The right action at the wrong time brings resistance.

The wrong action at the right time is a mistake.

The right action at the right time results in success.

2) Truth and timing are twin essentials in resolving conflict. In the case of Onesimus, Paul knew who was ultimately responsible at this point (Philemon) and he knows what the right thing to do is (to set Onesimus free and send him back). So, he puts the ball in Philemon's court. Just as Paul is trying to do the right thing in the right way, Philemon needs to have the opportunity to do the same. Note how Paul unfolds this 2-step challenge.

1) Know who is responsible

- Paul knew that ultimately Philemon had to make the call. This was true legally as well as spiritually. "But I didn't want do anything without your consent" again reveals Paul's heart. Paul will not presume on their friendship nor will he usurp Philemon's rightful authority in the world in which they lived. He knew Philemon and Onesimus needed to have a face to face meeting. Philemon still owned Onesimus. In the evil world of slavery there was an owner and a slave who was his legal (though not rightful) property.

- Whenever we seek to resolve conflicts, we must identify who is responsible and where responsibility lies. Further, and this is so very important. Those who are responsible must take responsibility. We may need to lead them to that place, but they must go there.

## 2) Know what is right

- What is right is to do the right thing out of proper motivation. God is just as concerned, if not more so, with the heart as well as the act. Thus Paul says to Philemon, I want “your good deed” to be done “not out of obligation, but of your own free will.” Paul will not demand or force Philemon to do the right thing. Why? Because he wishes to shepherd his heart in this very difficult and trying situation. He wants his “participation in the faith to become effective” (v.6). He wants God to do a work in Onesimus, Philemon, and the fledgling community meeting in Philemon’s home. An obedient but unwilling Philemon will only breed contempt and bitterness. Doing the right thing because he wants to will 1) truly glorify God and 2) be good for the community as they watch (and they are watching!) the gospel put on full display for all to see. Do the right thing! Do it for the right reason too! Many things are at stake.

1) What do we mean by the sovereignty and providence of God?

Theologically, sovereignty means His Lordship reigns over all that exists.

Nothing is beyond His authority, power and rule. Providence is an aspect of His sovereignty and is the outworking of all his decrees. As my pastor and missionary friend Jim Wilson says, “it is the hand of God molding all events and directing the progress of all things to suit his purpose. It is God controlling all circumstances to bring about what He wants to be brought about. It is the opposite of chance. Nothing sneaks up on God, He is in control of everything that happens in the universe” (Sermon, “What God Can do, “Philemon 8-16; unpublished).

2) Nothing sneaks up on God. Nothing is left to chance. There are no accidents or coincidences with God. This is what we mean, and Paul certainly embraced such a theology. No “process deity” for Paul. No “open theism” for this apostle! Watch carefully as Paul closes out this portion of his argument. The words are simple, but the theology is strong. A commercial may say, “You are in good hands with All-State Insurance,” but the Bible says, “You are in great hands with God.” (J. Wilson).

1) God’s goals are eternal not temporal v.15

1) “Perhaps this is why...” Paul is humble and admits we cannot know the divine mind and plan except that which he has revealed to us.

John MacArthur says, “He says perhaps because no man can see the secret providence of God at work. But it is surely reasonable to assume that God had this in mind when Onesimus left. Paul suggests to Philemon that God was using the evil to produce good (Gen. 50:20); Rom. 8:28). God triumphs over sin through His providential power and grace. He takes the myriad contingencies of human actions and uses them to accomplish His own purposes” (223). So Philemon lost him for a while temporarily, but now he is getting him back forever (“permanent”). He lost him as a slave, but now he gets him back” as a dearly loved brother.”

2) Paul challenges Philemon to see the big picture, to see, if you like, the BIG STORY not the little one. I like Moo’s insight on this verse when he writes, “Paul’s suggestion about the divine intention behind Onesimus’ separation from Philemon (vv. 15-16) might be a kind of ‘commentary’ on the events he has narrated in vv. 8-14” (Moo, 418).

3) Only by seeing God’s purpose in all of this does the flight of Onesimus make sense. It is good that they are back together now. It is so much better that they will be together forever; not as master-slave, but as brother-brother!

- C. S. Lewis says, “There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal. Nations, cultures, arts, civilizations – these are mortal, and their life is to ours as the life of a gnat. It is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub, and exploit” (*The Weight of Glory*, 46).
- And, Martin Luther King Jr. says, “...the founding fathers were really influenced by the Bible. The whole concept of the *imago Dei*...is the idea that all men have something within them that God injected. Not that they have substantial unity with God, but that every man has a capacity to have fellowship with God. And this gives him uniqueness.... There are no gradations in the image of God. *Every man from a treble white to a bass black is significant on God’s keyboard, precisely because every man is made in the image of God.* One day we will learn that. We will know one day that God made us to live together as brothers and to respect the dignity and worth of every man. This is why we must fight segregation with all of our non-violent might.” (Sermon, 1965).
- Paul, I believe, would agree with both of these men. The Roman Empire saw Onesimus as a slave. It saw only with the eyes of the flesh. Paul, in stark contrast, saw Onesimus as “a dearly loved

brother.” He was family, and now part of a very special family, God’s family. For Paul, this was “especially” precious, because he saw Onesimus as not only a brother, but his son (v.10). Now for Philemon, this new spiritual status of Onesimus should be “even more” special. Why? Because he is getting Onesimus back on both an earthly and spiritual plane. Yes, he is returning as your slave. But, even better than that, you are getting him back as a brother! Now Philemon can see the providence of God in all of this. What the evil one meant for evil God had worked for good, the greatest good of all, the salvation of Onesimus. Philemon had to see this. He had to rejoice in this. And yet, and this is so important: Only the eyes of faith in one crucified like a slave Himself could enable him to see things as they truly are.

### **Conclusion**

1) Paul, through the power of Christ and the gospel, had learned the value of saying the right thing, in the right way, at the right time and to the right person. I think he understood quite well what an anonymous author penned:

A careless word may kindle strife;

A cruel word may wreck a life.

A bitter word may smite and kill;



A brutal word may do more still.

A gracious word may smooth the way;

A joyous word may brighten the day.

A timely word may lessen stress;

A loving word may heal and bless.

2) Paul was determined to do all that he could to bless Philemon, Onesimus and the church that met in their home. He believed the God who had reconciled sinners to Himself through His Son the Lord Jesus, could also reconcile a master and a slave who are now brothers! This is the beauty and power of the gospel at work in people's lives. It is a glorious thing to put on display for a watching world to see.