

“The Call For Genuine Love”

Philemon 1 – 25

Could your children do anything so bad you would stop loving them? Probably not! You may disagree with their decisions, object to what they are doing, but deep down in your heart love is always there. What about someone outside your family? The scripture lesson is an example of the way God loves, loving like a parent and more. The book of Philemon is a short book, but long on truth.

The Greeting, (vss. 1 – 3). Paul is a prisoner in Rome and he send this letter to Philemon a wealthy man in Laodicea several thousand miles away. Paul offers greetings not only to Philemon but also to Apphia, possibly Philemon’s wife and also to Archippus his son as well as the church that meets in Philemon’s house. Laodicea was one of the seven churches listed in the book of Revelation, the “lukewarm church” and it was destroyed in A.D. 60. Later rebuilt and known for black wool and phrygian powder, a special eye medicine.

The Reason for the Letter. The letter has to do with a run-a-way slave named Onesimus who belongs to Philemon who somehow came into contact with the Apostle Paul who was in prison. Paul is sending Onesimus back to Philemon even though in those days run-a-way slaves were branded, tortured or killed. Apparently, Onesimus is now a Christian and helpful to Paul and Paul would like to keep him but because he belongs to Philemon, Paul is sending him back. Paul is reminding Philemon that he and Onesimus are no longer just owner and slave, but Christian brothers. It certainly is true that there are some unusual demands made upon Christians. It would be interesting to know Philemon’s first thoughts when he first read this letter.

The Character, (vss. 4 – 7). Paul addresses Philemon as a fellow worker and he also mentions the rest of his family and the church that meets in his house. Paul then goes on to thank Philemon for his prayers and for his faith in the Lord Jesus Christ as well as his love for all the saints. This is all a source of joy and consolation for Paul while he is in prison. Paul understands and sees in Philemon the truth of (vs. 7), “Your love has given me great joy and encouragement, because you, brother,

have refreshed the hearts of the saints”, and this should be true of every Christian.

The Appeal, (vss. 8 – 20). Paul could order Philemon to take Onesimus back, but he appeals on the basis of love. Could Philemon trust Onesimus in the future? Well, in real life, love takes chances and Philemon could receive Onesimus back and give him a chance to grow and mature in his new found faith. In the past Onesimus was unprofitable to Philemon, but now he is profitable to both Paul and Philemon. Onesimus helped Paul and Paul wanted to keep him but he is sending him back to his owner. Paul gives Philemon something to think about as he says, maybe Onesimus left you for a while so you could receive him back forever, a better person. The center of this appeal to Philemon is to accept Onesimus now as more than a slave, but as a brother in the Lord. Paul then tells Philemon that if he considers Paul a partner, welcome him back as you would welcome me and if he owes you anything, I will take care of that and I will not go into all that you owe me for your soul's salvation.

Paul gets to the end of this letter and lays his very heart out to Philemon in (vss. 21-22) as he is expecting Philemon to do this and more, thereby bringing joy to Paul. Forgiveness is not easy, neither is expressing Christian love to those who have wronged us and the fact is sure that it costs to be a Christian. This very truth played a big part in the story of Philemon and Onesimus.

What happened to Onesimus? Did Philemon receive him back as a brother in Christ? We can only guess, but one theory has it that Paul got Onesimus back as a gift from Philemon. Also found in an ancient letter of Ignacius refers to “Onesimus, Bishop of Ephesus.” also interesting that we are told the first collection of Paul's letters originated in Ephesus. Some have wondered why this short letter was included in the scriptures. If indeed Onesimus spent more time with Paul could Onesimus, Bishop of Ephesus told Paul, “You've got to tell my story.” Pure speculation.

But this isn't. Philemon is the gospel in one small letter and the only thing this little gospel needs is a rewrite; one rewrite, then another and another, beginning in your heart and mine. Is there someone you need to welcome back and forgive and love? It is a chance to experience growth in your faith in Jesus Christ. Love as he loves.

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