

Scripture Reference: Philemon 1-7

Date: November 2, 2014

Title: "Being Known for the Right Reason"

Focus: Being Known for the Character of God in Your Life
(Philemon Study 1 of 4)

Philemon is probably the most personal of Paul's letters. In it he does not attempt to teach or correct an error that has been encountered. Instead, in it he intercedes with a friend about his runaway slave, Onesimus.

This letter is not to be taken as an endorsement of slavery. Paul is merely mediating God's grace into a reality of the Roman world of the first century (as many as a third of the people in Rome are thought to have been slaves). Followers of Jesus live in a sinful world and must learn to let the character of God radiate from them in this fallen state. This is at the heart of Paul's letter to Philemon.

Verses 1 through 3 are Paul's greeting.

vv. 4-5; Philemon was a Blessing to Paul

Philemon brought Joy to Paul when he thought about him. This was primarily because of Philemon's "*love and . . . faith.*"

Philemon's life bore the marks of love affiliated with God and trust over reason.

Listen to how Paul explains it:

"I hear of your love and of the faith which you have toward the Lord Jesus."

Philemon lived in the experience of God's love towards him and the rest of humanity. He viewed life through the lens of trusting God.

"I hear of your love and of the faith which you have . . . toward all the saints."

His experience of God's love, his love for God and his confidence in God spilled out upon those with whom he lived in community.

You may want to say, "Why then did he own a slave?" There are two things to keep in mind:

a. Slavery took many forms in the first century. One form was indentured servanthood as was found in America in the 16 and 1700s. There is no indication of the nature of Onesimus' slavery.

b. Obedience in one or more areas of a person's life is not synonymous with obedience in all areas of life. If it were, then a person could be perfect.

Philemon was not a perfect individual. However, his life was of such character that God's nature was present. Therefore, Paul was confident obedience would manifest itself in the issue involving Onesimus.

vv. 6-7; "The Fellowship of Your Faith" (NAS)

This is a difficult passage, because the meaning in the original language is muddled.

Translators have struggled with its meaning:

KJV: "*that the communication of thy faith may become effectual.*"

NIV: "*that you may be active in sharing your faith.*"

The NAS renders the original language literally, "*that the fellowship of your faith may become effective.*"

Is Paul referring to Philemon sharing his faith (as conveyed by the KJV and NIV - something not indicated in the context) or the fellowship of faith among believers as seen with the NAS?

The individual words rendered "communication" (KJV), "sharing" (NIV), "fellowship" (NAS) and "faith" have meaning. We just don't think of them in connection with one another.

The context indicates Paul is talking about the *experiential nature* of Christianity (vv. 4 & 5). Onesimus' life was shaped by his love for and faith in God. In this context the idea of a *fellowship in faith* fits.

Faith is not exclusively an aspect of the will or the mind. People do not just decide to trust. They decide to trust based on their experience of the trustworthiness of the one being trusted. They then act on the decision to trust the one who shows He can be trusted. Therefore, faith is a *fellowship* of a person's heart, mind, and body with the God who has shown Himself to be worthy of trust with others who are walking in faith with God as well.

This idea is reinforced by Paul's next words. He states his hope that Philemon's "*fellowship of faith,*" may "*become*

effective through the knowledge of every good thing which is in you for Christ's sake."

As Philemon increased in his knowledge of God, it was Paul's hope he would trust God more and demonstrate increased faith by his actions towards others, particularly Onesimus who Paul is about to ask Philemon about.

Faith is a quantum state; an interaction of all a person is in relationship to others based in an encounter with God. Keep in mind; a person will not trust a God they do not know.

vv. 8-9; A Surrendered Will Need not be Compelled to Obey

Paul moves on to bring up the topic of Onesimus, Philemon's run-away slave.

However, given what Paul just stated, I wonder who was really the slave, Onesimus or Philemon? Philemon had obviously bound himself to God by love and faith. His life was shaped by his obedience to God as evidenced by his love for "the saints."

Paul acknowledges his position as an Apostle and the nature of his relationship with Philemon gave him the authority to "order" Philemon to release Onesimus, but he didn't believe that necessary.

Philemon had shown him one who was willing to "*do what is proper*" (v. 8) without having to be compelled.

Those surrendered to a relationship with God accept personal loss and deny their wishes and desires for the sake of

obedience to God and the advancement of His Kingdom (Matt. 16:24-26; Mark 8:34-36; Lk 9:23-25). They need not be ordered.

The Last Eighteen Inches

Philemon was a man who had faith in God. This is evident in his love to fellow believers. This gave Paul confidence he would extend that love to Onesimus who had run away.

Paul was confident that whatever the cost, Onesimus would take God honoring action.

Do you experience the “fellowship of [the] faith”? Is your experience of God and His faithful nature such that are one God can call upon?