

# Philemon

*Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.*

Date: 13 November 2016

Preacher: Paul Levy

[ 0 : 00 ] Amen.

We start our meetings of an evening, or normally we start this week, we read it at the end, by reading a chapter of the Westminster Confession of Faith. And we're up to chapter 30, which is a chapter of Church Discipline.

And we read it in our meeting this week. And I know the Westminster Confession quite well, and yet I was incredibly struck by the words of that chapter.

In fact, I spent the rest of the weekend reading around it. And I feel convicted that maybe we as a church, and certainly I have not taught you as a congregation on church discipline, as we should have.

And it is a remarkable chapter, I'm not going to tell you about it, I want you to go home and read about it. But it is an incredible chapter, which I think is very, very helpful to the church in this country. One of the problems with church discipline in the UK is if somebody is put under church discipline, and they disagree with it and don't like it, what happens?

[ 1 : 30 ] Well, they normally, ordinarily go to the church five minutes down the road. The church sometimes, occasionally, gives me a ring or checks, but very often more than often doesn't.

And so actually, church discipline has become, not impossible, but very, very difficult. So churches like ours, I think, have thought well, bury it. And that is to the detriment of the church.

It's to the detriment of the church because the church is a remarkable thing. And I think Philemon teaches us that maybe in a way that no other book does. Because it teaches us about our fellowship in the faith.

It teaches us about our participation in the faith. Your sharing in the faith that it may become effective.

That's what Paul's prayer for the Philemon's was. As we saw last time in verse 6 of this letter, his prayer for Philemon, his dear friend, and the host of the gathering of the church in Colossae, he prays that the effectiveness of the fellowship of the believers, the fellowship, partnership that the believers share, would be seen.

[ 2 : 51 ] And I would argue that the fellowship that the believers share is seen most clearly in difficult situations. Where this fellowship changes things in unexpected ways.

There is, the background to this letter, a very difficult situation in the Colossian church. And on the day that this letter to Philemon was read out before the believers gathered in his house, it's still a running sore.

We fear that Philemon's confidence, or Paul's confidence, that Philemon's participation in the faith would be effective because of Philemon's track record in the fellowship of the believers.

Look at verse 7. For I have derived much comfort and much joy from your love, my brother, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you.

Philemon was a man who cared for his fellow Christians, and he cared deeply in his words and his acts, and I have no doubt in his prayers. He cared about other people's welfare, especially their faith in the Lord Jesus, their love for one another, their hope.

[ 4 : 05 ] And Paul had little doubt that Philemon's fellowship of the faith would be effective in this difficult matter that the letter was now going to raise with him.

How does this work? How does the fellowship of believers, the fellowship of believers in the faith, how does this fellowship become effective, particularly in difficult situations?

By difficult situations, I mean, if it were not for the fellowship of believers, things would be really different. We do not see the power of the fellowship of believers simply when like-minded people share a great deal in common, and they enjoy one another's company and friendship.

Now, there's nothing wrong with that. There is nothing wrong with like-minded people who share a great deal in common, enjoying each other's company. But I want to argue that isn't really what the biblical idea of fellowship is about.

That will always be part of fellowship, won't it? But the fellowship of the faith, fellowship in the faith, in Christ, is much more powerful than that. It's more than new mates, it's more than new friends I make at church.

[ 5 : 21 ] And I want us to see, and I want us to know, the power of the fellowship in difficult situations. The situation in Colossae on that day, when this letter was being read out, was at the extreme end of difficulty.

We heard the story last time, two weeks ago. Philemon was the man from Colossae, who the Apostle Paul had led to faith, some years earlier in Ephesus. Paul is now at the house arrest in Rome, where he'd met Anasimus.

The slave who'd run away from Philemon's household. And we learn a little bit more about the difficulties between Anasimus and Philemon in a few moments. But Paul has now led Anasimus to the same faith in Christ Jesus as Philemon had.

These three men are all believers in Christ Jesus. These three men are in the fellowship of the faith. And how is the fellowship of the faith going to be effective among them?

The Apostle, the slave, and the master. Now let's take up the letter where we left it, remembering two things. We are to imagine that it's being read out aloud before the whole gathering of believers in Philemon's home.

[ 6 : 36 ] We saw that. We alluded to that from verse 2, and from verse 8 onwards, down at least verse 21. The person being addressed there is Philemon, in the singular. So I'm taking it up from verse 8.

Accordingly, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do what is required, yet for love's sake I prefer to appeal to you.

I, Paul, an old man, and now a prisoner also for Christ Jesus, I appeal to you for my child Anasimus, whose father I became in my imprisonment. Formerly, when he was with you before, Anasimus was useless.

But now he is indeed useful to you and to me, and I am sending him back to you, sending my very heart. I would have been glad to keep him with me, in order that he might serve me on your behalf, doing my imprisonment for the gospel.

But I prefer to do nothing without your consent, in order that your goodness might not be by compulsion, but of your own accord. For this reason, perhaps, is why he was parted from you for a little while, that you might have him back forever.

[ 7 : 44 ] No longer as a bondservant, but more than a bondservant, as a beloved brother. Especially to me. But how much more to you, both in the flesh, and in the Lord.

Those who share faith in Christ Jesus, I hope that's you tonight, are brought into a very remarkable relationship, with one another.

It is not a little thing, to be a believer in the Lord Jesus Christ, and to be in the fellowship of faith. And to witness this particular example, of the fellowship of faith at work, and becoming effective, we need to see the various relationships involved.

So first of all, look with me on Paul's relationship to Philemon. And Paul draws two aspects of that friendship. Firstly, in verse 8, accordingly, he's drawing a conclusion, from what we saw last time, which is Paul's prayer in verse 6, and his confidence in verse 7.

Verse 8, accordingly, though I am bold enough in Christ, to command you to do what is required. Paul is the apostle. That is of course how he introduced himself, isn't it?

[ 9 : 04 ] In the book of Colossians. He is moreover the person who brought Christ to Philemon, and Philemon to Christ. And as an apostle of Christ Jesus, by the will of God, Paul was never timid, was he of unchanging instructions, and warnings, and rebukes, and even commands, when the occasion warranted it.

And this occasion did warrant some of those things. But one of the marvels of this little letter, is how Paul holds back. He holds back from explicitly telling Philemon what he should do.

He refers to this point, doesn't he, to what is required. What is fitting. What is proper. He doesn't actually indicate clearly, just what that is.

He simply indicates, doesn't it, clearly, that there is something he's hoping, and he's expecting Philemon will do. And we might feel it might be a lot easier, for all concerned, if Paul had just come out and told Philemon what he expects of him.

But he doesn't. It certainly makes life a lot easier for preachers and commentators, and PhD students. There's a lot of speculation, and a lot of guesswork, and papers and books have been written, trying to work out in verse 8, what is required, what that means at the end.

[10:23] I think in some ways, that's one of the keys to the letter. Because Paul had good reason for not simply telling Philemon what to do. Though he could have done that, look at verse 9.

Yet for love's sake, I prefer to appeal to you. He's a brother, isn't he? I, Paul, an old man, and now a prisoner also for Christ Jesus.

You see, our fellowship in the faith does not become effective through commands. That's not to say there's no place for commands in church life and in the Christian fellowship.

But in the Christian fellowship, there is something better than commands. There's something bigger than commands. There's something more powerful than commands.

I appeal, says Paul. I appeal. I encourage. I exhort.

[11:28] And the reason is for love's sake. Because of love. Philemon's love for God's people, he's already spoken about that in verse 5 and in verse 7.

And Paul's love for Philemon is mentioned in verse 1, isn't it? Our beloved fellow worker. It's implied in verse 7.

My brother. Those who share faith in Christ know the love of God. And so they are to love one another.

Paul and Philemon did because of love, says Paul. I prefer to appeal to you. And so to underline the lack of coercion.

He answers in verse 9, I, Paul, an old man, am now a prisoner also for Christ Jesus. It's the second time he refers to his imprisonment.

[12:28] And he answers age. He is not coming down on Philemon with a heavy hand. This is an old man speaking and an old man in chains.

And just by the way, isn't it, for those of us who are elders, there's only three of us here tonight. Hopefully a few more in the future. We are significantly less important than the Apostle Paul, aren't we?

And we are much less in a position than to be given commands. And we would do well to take note of Paul's manner at this point. There is, and there may well be a time and a place to wield authority, but that was never Paul's preferred way.

And it should never be our preferred way either. Because of love, verse 9, for love's sake, I prefer to appeal to you. And still we wait for exactly what he wanted Philemon to do.

The first hint comes in verse 10, where Paul speaks of a second relationship. I appeal to you for my child Onesimus, whose father I became in my imprisonment.

[13:39] So let's see Paul's relationship with Onesimus. In the original, he doesn't actually mention the name until the very end of the sentence. So he says, I appeal to you for my child, whose father I became in my imprisonment, Onesimus.

But I can't imagine the awkward silence in the church fellowship and the mention of that name. Everyone knew, everybody. Everyone knew, no doubt, of the escape from Philemon's household and perhaps of the robbery.

And his presence with Paul's envoy, Tychicus, must have caused quite a stir, wasn't it, when the two of them arrived in Colossae. There must have been some tension and some difficulty with Onesimus' presence in the gathering when that first letter was read out.

You can imagine the nudges and the whispers and the wide eyes, the wonders on people's face. The look of utter bewilderment on those people who'd never even heard of Onesimus and who've come to the church recently.

They hear Paul had written with Tychicus, I have sent you Onesimus, our faithful and beloved brother, who is one of you. But whatever people may or may not have guessed about Paul's letter to Philemon, this now is the first hint that it has to do with Onesimus.

[15:05] But not to put a too fine point on it, Onesimus represents a very difficult situation. What Paul wants to underline about Onesimus at this point is that Paul had brought him to faith in Christ, to new birth.

He is therefore Paul's child in his imprisonment and Paul had become his father by being instrumental in him receiving new life. He had left Colossae as a criminal and he was returning a different man. Just notice how he's described. It goes on in verse 11 doesn't it, to say formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful to you and to me.

His name is Onesimus which means literally useful or profitable. It's a common name for slaves in those days. It was probably given to them by their masters in the hope that they'd make some money in the hope that they would live up to it.

But apparently this Onesimus had not lived up to his name. And here's just a little glimpse isn't it into Onesimus' life before he was a Christian.

[16:18] Into the earlier relationship there was between this slave and his master. He was useless. Perhaps he was a troublemaker, perhaps he was lazy, perhaps he was insolent, perhaps he was dishonest.

perhaps he was all those things. We have every reason to think that Philemon certainly after his conversion he would be a fair and a just master.

He would know very well that he had a master in heaven before whom he should give account to. But apparently Onesimus was a very unsatisfactory slave. It is possible isn't it that Philemon would not have been very distressed when he ran away.

I don't know whether you've got work colleagues like that. I haven't got work colleagues like that. But you know how it is in the office. When somebody is just better when they don't turn up. The office is a much happier place when they're not around.

And maybe it was like that for Philemon because previously he was useless. But Paul insists that the man returning to Colossae is a different man.

[17:33] Now he is useful. Both to you and to me. More about his usefulness in a minute. Now I know we have some difficulties with this because of the serious problem that we have with slavery.

And we give some thought to those issues when we look to Colossae chapter 3. I'm not going to revisit that tonight. You can get the sermon and listen to that again. But I do think this issue, issue raised by slavery makes Philemon a really powerful case study.

A powerful case study in the power of the Christian fellowship. Because here we see two men who have not just become Christians but two men who have a very difficult history.

The useless slave and his master are they are now both believers in Jesus. And how will the fellowship of faith work? Well Paul's appeal is not finished.

He clearly wants Philemon to be under no misapprehensions about his, that is Paul's relationship with Onesimus. You see verse 12, I am sending him back to you.

[18:46] Sending my very heart. That is the fellowship of the faith at work already. Let's put the difficulties between Philemon and Onesimus to one side for a woman and let's consider Paul and Onesimus.

Consider the improbability of the Jewish prisoner from Rome and the fugitive Gentile on the run. The slave and the Jewish prisoner finding anything at all in common and yet Paul says he is my very heart.

The affection of Paul the apostle for Onesimus the slave was deep and strong and that is the fellowship of the faith at work. And further verse 13 he says I would have been glad to keep him. I would have been glad to keep him with me in order that he might serve me on your behalf during my imprisonment for the gospel. Paul was certainly not sending Onesimus back to Philemon because he wanted to.

If it were a matter of Paul's preference he would have kept Onesimus with him. He'd been caring for Paul in some way during his imprisonment but more likely given the words that Paul actually uses here Onesimus was helping Paul in gospel work.

[20:08] Can you see that? During his confinement in Rome they were working together. They were laboring together in the gospel. And they were working together well. Onesimus was indeed useful to Paul in the sense he was standing in for Philemon so to speak.

Because you remember that Philemon in all probability had served like this with Paul in Ephesus. So let's thirdly see Paul and Philemon's relationship concerning Onesimus.

Paul's relationship to Onesimus was not the only reality of the fellowship of the faith. We've already seen something of Paul's relationship to Philemon and his relationship to Onesimus that is of consequences.

So Paul continues in verse 14. But I prefer to do nothing without your consent in order that your goodness might not be by compulsion but of your own accord.

Or back when we started on again in verses 8 and 9. Paul did not want Philemon's hand to be forced either by apostolic command, verse 8, or by an apostolic pre-emptive action, verse 4, 14.

[ 21 : 23 ] What Philemon did, literally the good thing, was to come from his heart, not from forced necessity. Now I wonder whether you're beginning to see how the fellowship of the faith becomes effective.

It's being effective, being gradually filled in for us. We still haven't heard exactly what Paul expects or wants Philemon to do. He just calls it in verse 14 that good thing.

Which may well remind us of verse 6, where the fellowship of the faith becomes effective in the knowledge of every good thing that is in us with a view of Christ. That might remind us of the prayer in Paul's other letters that believers would be filled with the knowledge of God's will so that they would bear fruit.

In every good word. But we still don't know. We still don't know precisely what it was that Paul was expecting Philemon to do. The point however is that the good thing, whatever it might be, must come from Philemon's believing hearts.

Can you see that? Not by believing compulsion if it's going to be for the fellowship of the faith to become effective. It must be of his own accord.

[ 22 : 36 ] Now before Paul actually tells Philemon what he expects of him, and he actually will before the day is out, let's see Paul Philemon and Anasimus and the Lord. He's got one more observation. Anasimus may well have been useless previously.

He may well have caused some difficulty for Philemon by his running away. He may well have stolen him. And all of these actions were wrong, but Paul knew who it was that rules over the affairs of men and women.

We cannot infallibly discern his purpose, particularly with events that are involved in wrong human actions. We can't discern. Sometimes, and especially with the benefit of hindsight, we can't guess what God's purpose was for us in the hard situations that life brings.

And so Paul continues in verse 15 for he says, for this perhaps is why he was parted from you for a while, that you might have him back forever, and no longer as a bond servant, but more than a bond servant, as a beloved brother, especially to me, but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord.

It's an extraordinary thing that has happened. the useless slave was lost to Philemon for a time. It's not at all clear to me that Philemon was particularly anxious to have him back, but God's purpose in this may well have been precisely that Philemon would have Onesimus back forever, but not as a slave.

[ 24 : 10 ] That would not be the defining relationship between these two men. That would not be the relationship that would go on forever. The relationship that would go on forever is that they would be beloved brothers, just as he had become to Paul.

A loved brother in the flesh and in the Lord. And that is not just in the spiritual sense, but in the reality of human relationships. These two men were now to be loved brothers to one another. And that is the fellowship of the faith at work. So what is it exactly Paul hoped Philemon would do with all that preparation he's now about to tell him.

And he does so from verse 17. Now I don't know whether we're going to come back to the rest of this letter, but I'm going to read it to you and you'll get the gist of it. Verse 17. So if you consider me your partner, again that's the fellowship word, so keen to Philemon, receive him as you would receive me.

That's something, isn't it? If he's wronged you at all or owes you anything, charge that to my account. And I think we're all to understand that Onesimus has wronged Philemon.

[ 25 : 27 ] I, Paul, write this with my own hand. I will repay it to say nothing of your owing me, even your own self. Yes, brother, I want some benefit from you in the Lord.

Refresh my heart in Christ Jesus. Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say, at the same time, provide a guest room for me, for I'm hoping that through your prayers, and now he breaks back into the pruer, and he's got the whole group in mind, through your prayers, I will be graciously given to you.

The path for us, my fellow servant in Christ Jesus sends feet into you, and so does Mark, our starkest demons, live to my fellow workers. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. There is a little footnote to the story that I want to finish with.

But I'm pretty sure that the survival of this letter is evidence enough that Philemon heeded the appeal. I don't think we'd have it if Philemon hadn't acted on this.

And indeed, history has a very tantalising fact that we cannot be certain to connect with this. But at the beginning of the second century, right at the start of the second century, there was a bishop of Ephesus named Onesimus.

[ 26 : 52 ] And it could be a most remarkable conclusion to one of the Bible's most amazing stories. But whether or not the Ephesus bishop was Onesimus, something remarkable happened at Colossae.

The fellowship of faith, the participation of faith in Christ Jesus, sharing in that most profound of all human experience, became effective.

And once we see this, we cannot rest content with our fellowship in the faith that we have at IBC just being friendships that may well have happened anyway for like-minded people with much in common enjoying each other's company.

That is not church. Of course, there's nothing wrong with that. But the fact that there are no slave masters listening today to my knowledge, and no runaway slaves, and the fact that we feel so removed from the particular situation represented here in this letter does not mean for a moment that we can remain unaffected by this word.

Because let us see that our fellowship in the faith at work, at work in the difficult situations that life brings along, in the relationships in church life that are to say the least awkward between people, people who have good reasons not to get along, people who you might have an unfortunate history with.

[ 28 : 29 ] Our fellowship in the faith has yet more wonderful work to accomplish amongst us. And let our fellowship in the faith become more and more effective.

Let's pray.