



Image credit: Manna Church

Philemon is the shortest book in the New Testament. Our reading this morning includes the entire book except for the final four farewell verses that name Paul's co-laborers in spreading the gospel even as Paul is imprisoned. One question that comes to my mind is why this text is included in our Bible? What was important to the people then and to us now that we should spend time, as the Collect says, in reading, learning and inwardly digesting¹ this letter from Paul?

Paul's approach shows us the old adage: you can achieve more or better results often by using honey than vinegar. Paul could have, due to his status as a leader in the early church, simply ordered Philemon to free Onesimus, a slave. And, I believe, Philemon would have obeyed but perhaps been resentful. Philemon might have perceived Paul as overstepping his authority and interfering in the way Philemon ran his household.

Paul, rather, takes the approach of praising Philemon for the sharing of the faith and acknowledges that the saints have been refreshed through the example of Philemon's life. Then, Paul makes his request to Philemon to free Onesimus and to see and treat Onesimus as a brother in Christ. Then Paul praises Philemon once again. Today we might call this approach a "criticism sandwich."

As humans, when we need to criticize someone else, if we take the approach of giving a compliment, then the criticism and end with another complement, we can "hear" the need for change more easily and less defensively. The criticism – or the change we want made – is sandwiched between two positive statements. Paul was using this approach and I suspect Philemon responded much like we would today with an "ok, I can make that change because I know you see my good points and how important I am to this business of spreading the gospel."

Paul could have, because of his position or power, simply told Philemon what to do. But Paul was hoping a different approach would change Philemon's mind about his relationship with Onesimus. Paul was hoping this approach would cause Philemon to rethink how he viewed other human beings- even slaves- now that Philemon was a Christian. Fred Clark writes: "Paul's letter, in fact, is an extravagant exercise in **not** telling Philemon what to do".² Clark continues that the purpose of this approach is to help Philemon improve his character, his way of life and worldview. So perhaps this is why this short letter is part of our canon. It's a reminder to us of how important character is. As the Crawfordsville School District has put it: character counts.

¹ *Book of Common Prayer*, Collect 28, p. 236.

² <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/slacktivist/2012/10/11/the-book-of-philemon-does-not-defend-slavery/> (9/2/19)

And, character counts even more as a practicing Christian. We are the people that our world looks to as representing Jesus Christ.

It's clear from this text that Onesimus was a slave. And Paul is not asking for the abolishment of slavery. Rather, he is asking for Onesimus to be treated as a human being, worthy of dignity and respect. I'm sure Paul would have been pleased if Philemon did free Onesimus but that isn't what Paul mandates be done. Paul also acknowledges that Onesimus has done wrong by running away and that punishment may be appropriate. Paul acknowledges Philemon's property rights in Onesimus under that culture even as Paul hopes Philemon, as a Christian, will not punish Onesimus. Rather, Paul hopes that Philemon will willingly and freely return Onesimus to Paul who considers Onesimus his brother-in-Christ and thus of use to Paul in Paul's ministry. Paul is willing to pay whatever Onesimus owes to Philemon if Philemon will take this approach. Paul writes: "I preferred to do nothing without your consent in order that your good deed might be voluntary and not something forced."

How much better is our behavior when it is not forced; when we are not grumbling under our breath about "I have to".

Clark continues:

And yet, receiving this letter from the pen of Paul and the hand of Onesimus, Philemon would have to have been an idiot not to have understood exactly what it was that Paul *wanted* and *expected* him to do.

And to anyone reading this letter today — even 2,000 years later, after it has been canonized and translated — that message is just as obvious.

Paul has set the stage for a re-enactment of **Jesus' parable of the Prodigal Son**. He has cast Onesimus in the role of the son, sending him home to ask to be permitted to return to the household as a slave.

...[Philemon] was being **invited** to *embrace* Onesimus and to celebrate his return "no longer as a slave" but as *family*. And Paul goes beyond the parable's hierarchy of father and son, urging Philemon to embrace Onesimus as his *equal* — "a beloved *brother*."

Paul may also be asking us what we need to give up control over to serve the greater good of spreading the gospel. What do we consider "mine" and something God has no right to ask us to give up? And, will we give up whatever that might be without resentment? It's not easy being a Christian in 2019 and I imagine it's never been easy.

Jesus tells the crowd that in the reading from Luke: count the cost before you proclaim yourself a Christian. Be thoughtful. Be intentional. Recognize that all that we have and all that we are comes from God as a free gift and if we pick that gift up, there is a price to pay. The price might mean not engaging in behavior or in relationships that denigrate others. Name calling and hate are not acceptable.

Eugene Peterson, author of The Message, helps us here when he paraphrases Ephesians 5:2 as:

Watch what God does, and then you do it, like children who learn proper behavior from their parents. Mostly what God does is love you. Keep company with him and learn a life of love. Observe how Christ loved us. His love was not cautious but extravagant. He didn't love in order to get something from us but to give everything of himself to us. Love like that.

Love like that. Amen.