

A LESSON IN HUMILITY AND TACT

Philemon 1-25

Leo Douma

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How do you go about confronting someone on a difficult matter? Most of us avoid it as long as possible. Then we blow up at them! There is a better way which we see here in Paul's letter to Philemon. It is a letter we rarely look at. This letter is so different to his long letters to Romans or the Corinthians, full of theology and biblical teaching. What we have here is a short, very personal note to Paul's friend, Philemon. It is very rich in giving an example of how to tactfully approach someone when there could be lots of tension. I am reminded of the Proverb (12:18): *"There is one who speaks rashly like the thrusts of a sword. But the tongue of the wise brings healing."* Some people, just by the manner they express themselves, can leave us reeling. While others, with wisdom and tact can help bring people together and reconciled. What we see in Paul's letter is not just about technique. It shows a genuine, humble, Christ-centred approach to dealing with one another.

The background to this letter is that Philemon is a rich Christian living in Colossi, who owned several slaves. One of them, Onesimus, ran off, presumably having stolen stuff from his master. Onesimus had fled to Rome, 2000 kilometres away, to lose himself and be free in that large city. But as God's providence would have it, he came across Paul who was under house arrest, and was eventually converted by him. Onesimus had become a good Christian and was a wonderful help for Paul. But Paul feels it is not right that he now has helping him the slave of his good mate. So, he feels it is important for Onesimus to go back to Colossi, to his master and be reconciled. Now this is a difficult situation. It was a crime for a slave to run away, even worse if he had stolen from his master. The usual punishment was a severe beating, even death. Slaves were regarded in those days as the property of the master. They had no rights. They were seen as the 'living dead'. That is, they were still alive, but dead in terms of personal freedom. When a slave ran away, it was usually a mark against the master. It implied either that the master was too weak to properly control his slaves, or he was too harsh, beating them so often that they would rather run off and face possible death by being caught escaping. A slave running off could also have broader ramifications for the local folk, especially if the slave was the steward of the house, the accountant who managed all the master's affairs. So, Philemon was within his legal rights to deal very strongly with Onesimus. Paul in this letter is appealing to Philemon

to receive his slave back, forgive him, be reconciled with him, and let him go back to Paul to help him. Let's go through this letter and see how Paul does it.

Paul very carefully builds a platform from which to launch his appeal. It starts in verse 1 as he introduces himself as the writer of the letter: *"Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus..."* Already here, Paul is setting the stage. He usually started his letters: *"Paul an Apostle..."* By that he gave his credentials, his authority; his right to command. But in this letter, there will be no commanding. There is no need to. He simply says who he is and then demonstrates how humble his own circumstances are. He himself is not a free man. He is a prisoner, at the whim of a master. But note he is not saying he is a prisoner of the Emperor in Rome, as he was, but *"a prisoner of Christ Jesus."* Jesus is master. Whatever Jesus wants from him that is what he humbly lives with.

In verse 2 we see Paul writes *"To Philemon our dear brother and fellow worker, to Apphia our sister, and Archippus our fellow soldier and to the church that meets in your home."* The letter is a personal letter to Philemon, not to the church, but Paul gives his greetings to the family and the church. Apphia is Philemon's wife, and Archippus his son, who was himself a leader in the church at Colossi. We can see that Philemon is a wealthy and very generous man. The church meets in his house. So, this is a good mature Christian family. Now Paul let's Philemon know that he prays for him a lot. (Verse 4ff) *"I always thank my God as I remember you in my prayers, because I hear about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints. I pray that you may be active in sharing your faith, so that you will have a full understanding of every good thing we have in Christ."* So many of Paul's letters have this opening. He thanks God for the people he is praying for. What a wonderful gift to give each other; that we pray for each other, regularly. And not just asking God to help others but thinking of the good things about each other. Giving thanks to God for each other, for the person's we are, the gifts we have, the faith we share in common. What a powerful attitude change it makes, how humbling, how enriching, that we think of others, see their faith and praise God for that. It's hard to be negative towards someone you are praising God for! Paul says he prays for Philemon that he might keep growing in the faith, that he might come to see more and more all the good we have in Christ. A Christian matures in the faith by focusing on Jesus. What Paul says is a preparation for what he will ask of Philemon. If Philemon is to be mature about how he responds to Onesimus then he needs to focus on Jesus. He needs to focus on all that he is and has in Jesus, on what Christ wants. Because if he focuses on Onesimus then he will just see a runaway slave. He will see the 'useless bloke' who has taken off with his stuff.

In verse 7 Paul compliments Philemon: *"Your love has given me great joy and encouragement, because you, brother, have refreshed the hearts of the saints."* We get to be 'spiritually refreshed' by someone caring for us, whose words of comfort, have shown you something of the wonder of God's grace in Jesus. There was something about Philemon that enabled him to refresh others in their faith. And Paul is not hesitant to say so and compliment him, to express the joy and encouragement he gets from it. Now, this compliment helps Paul to set Philemon in the right frame of mind when he gets to his appeal about Onesimus. But this is not just a manipulation, giving a compliment because he wants something. It is tragic that, even in churches, there are so few good encouraging words given. And if a compliment does come our way, we are wary, wondering what's coming next, what are we being set up for. Yes, Paul is very careful in how he sets the stage to place his appeal. But none of it is empty flattery or manipulation. He is honest and humble.

In verse 8-10 Paul now starts to get to the matter at hand: *"Therefore, although in Christ I could be bold and order you to do what you ought, yet I appeal on the basis of love. I then, as Paul- an old man and now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus- I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, who became my son while I was in chains."* Paul as an apostle was in a position of authority. He could tell Philemon what to do. But to do so would undercut all he has just said about Philemon. To command him would be to imply he is immature, incapable of making a good decision. It would take away the compliment, that Philemon was one who 'refreshed the hearts of others'. If we want others to grow up spiritually, then they need to be responsible for their own decision making. We can tell people to be in church, we can tell our kids to do this or that, and they may do so, outwardly, but if it doesn't come from the heart, it isn't their own decision, a commitment they have made to the Lord. No, Paul doesn't command, he appeals to Philemon, on the basis of love. Paul humbles himself showing himself to be an old man and a prisoner. It is at this point, that Paul now finally says why he wrote this letter *"I appeal to you for my son Onesimus"*. There is no blunt flopping it out. There is no demanding. He has very carefully given a context in which to place this appeal.

Now he goes on explaining why Philemon should be gentle with Onesimus. Paul has become very fond and dependent on Onesimus. He calls him his son. Those converted through Paul, those who assist him in the work, he regards as his spiritual sons. Paul disciplined these young men. He had them as apprentices letting them watch his life and teaching, so they would learn how to share the gospel. Paul admits Onesimus was not always the best slave for Philemon: (verse 11) *"Formerly he was useless to you, but now he has become useful both to you and to me"*. There is a play on words here - 'Onesimus' means 'useful'. Paul is making it clear to Philemon that Onesimus has changed,

changed radically. He is now a fine Christian man. Note how Paul says in verse 12 *"I am sending him- who is my very heart-back to you."* Paul is humbly admitting his feelings for the slave. He admits how it would affect him if Philemon were to beat Onesimus as he was legally entitled to do. Paul doesn't command or demand or manipulate, but appeals by sharing his deep feelings, what impact it would have on him. Paul is appealing: 'Do this for me'. Paul admits in verse 13 that he would like to keep Onesimus with him to assist in the work, but he humbly gives it over to Philemon, verse 14 *"But I did not want to do anything without your consent, so that any favour you do will be spontaneous and not forced."* Paul gives over to Philemon the power to make the decision. Paul puts his trust in his friend, his brother in Christ. Too many young people do not really mature because they are not given trust. Too often preachers keep demanding of their parishioners certain behaviour, implying they don't trust them to make good decisions.

Paul puts forward a suggestion to Philemon in verse 15 for him to consider *"Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back for good- no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother."* Paul is at no stage saying that he sees no fault in what Onesimus did. But wonders whether God in his providence has turned what was bad for Philemon into something very good. He is also saying to Philemon that he can no longer regard Onesimus just as property, a slave, a non person. Onesimus has become his brother in Christ.

It is now that Paul puts in the final point, spelling out what it is he is asking of Philemon; verse 17: *"So if you consider me a partner, welcome him as you would welcome me."* In other words, please forgive him. Love him as you love me, a brother in Christ. Love him as you would love Christ. Now Paul is not expecting Philemon to shoulder whatever the cost was of what Onesimus stole. It can be so easy just to say to another person they should forgive, when they face financial implications. Note what Paul says in verse 18&19 *"If he has done you any wrong or owes you anything, charge it to me. I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand. I will pay it back- not to mention that you owe me your very self."* Paul writes an IOU. He personally signs it. The language in the Greek is standard financial language 'Charge it to my account'. Paul doesn't just leave the financial implications with Philemon. He puts his money where his mouth is. He also leaves a gentle reminder: 'I may owe you now Philemon. But don't forget you owe me. I am your spiritual father. I am willing to put my action where my mouth is. Can you please do the same'.

Paul, in trust, leaves the matter with Philemon (verse 20&21) *"I do wish, brother, that I may have some benefit from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in Christ. Confident of your*

obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I ask." Such is Paul's confidence that the one who delivered the letter from Rome was Onesimus himself. He travelled with Tychicus to Colossi who had Paul's letter for the church there as we read in Colossians 4.

What I find so striking in this letter is the way Paul presents his appeal. He doesn't bluster and demand. He doesn't emotionally manipulate. If you think he does it's because we are so used to it, we tend to read it back into the text. I see a blend of sincerity, humility, wisdom and tact. Paul very carefully thinks through how to set up his appeal and approach. He is willing to humbly express his own needs, the emotional effects on himself, and lay them before Philemon. He has a positive view of Philemon because he is always praying for him and thanking God for the good Philemon does. Paul is willing to trust him, to trust that Christ is at work in Philemon. He trusts that he is mature as a Christian, who is also willing to be humble and listen to the appeal and do what is right. It is my prayer that I can be like Paul in my ministry, in my relationships. It is my prayer that each of us would be as humble, gracious, tactful and trusting. What an impact it would make in our homes, in our marriages, in our church relations, in our community life. Such humility and tact and grace are needed if we are to be a community of grace and hope.