

20. Learning to Request Instead of Demand

In our last topic, we saw that we want to help our physical and spiritual children learn to minister to one another. We also saw that Tychicus was the one who delivered the letter to the church in Colosse. He also delivered another letter while he was at Colosse. That was a personal letter to Philemon who had one of the churches in that area meeting in his home. We saw in the last topic that Onesimus traveled with Tychicus to deliver the letter to the Christians in Colosse. Paul also described Onesimus as a faithful and beloved brother. We will see in our topic today that had not always been true of Onesimus but the Lord had changed and transformed his life.

Paul began this letter by sending a greeting to Philemon and his family as well as a greeting to the church that met in his house. Philemon 1:1-3 says, “Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy *our* brother, to Philemon our beloved *friend* and fellow laborer, to the beloved Apphia, Archippus our fellow soldier, and to the church in your house: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” Here, we see that Paul began this letter by stating that he was a prisoner of Christ Jesus. This is a different word of introduction than the letter to the Colossians, which was delivered at the same time. Colossians 1:1 says, “Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God, and Timothy our brother.” In the letter to the church, Paul called himself an apostle. In this personal letter, he called himself a prisoner of Christ Jesus. Here, we see that Paul clearly understood that it was the plan of Christ for him to be a prisoner.

We see that Timothy is also included with Paul in the sending of this letter. This would show that Timothy had probably met Philemon, possibly at the same time that Paul had met him. This probably happened during the time that Paul and Timothy were in the city of Ephesus. Paul called Timothy our brother which indicates that Paul considered both Timothy and Philemon brothers in Christ. This talks about the family relationship that we have with all other Christians. Paul describes Philemon as our beloved friend and fellow laborer. Here, we see that Paul had a close relationship with Philemon. Paul also called Philemon a fellow laborer. Paul used the word that is translated “fellow laborer” in 1 Corinthians 3:9 where we read, “For we are God's fellow workers; you are God's field, *you are* God's building.” In that verse, Paul was talking about the fact that he and Apollos were fellow workers in spreading the Gospel.

Paul also sent greetings to Apphia and Archippus. These two were probably the wife and son of Philemon. Archippus is also called a fellow soldier. The only other place this word is used is in Philippians 2:25 where we read, “Yet I considered it necessary to send to you Epaphroditus, my brother, fellow worker, and fellow soldier, but your messenger and the one who ministered to my need.” Paul considered Epaphroditus a fellow soldier since they were ministering together in Rome at that time. In addition, Paul sent greetings to the church that met in the home of Philemon. For the first 300 years after Christ, the churches did not have their own buildings but met in a home or a public building that happened to be available. An example is found in Romans 16:5 where Paul sent greetings to the church that met in the home of Aquila and Priscilla. That verse says, “Likewise *greet* the church that is in their house. Greet my beloved Epaenetus, who is the firstfruits of Achaia to Christ.” Philemon probably had a larger home so the church met in his home. Paul gave a greeting, as he did in each letter, of grace and peace.

Philemon 1:4-7 goes on to say, “I thank my God, making mention of you always in my prayers, hearing of your love and faith which you have toward the Lord Jesus and toward all the saints, that the sharing of your faith may become effective by the acknowledgment of every good thing which is in you in Christ Jesus. For we have great joy and consolation in your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed by you, brother.” Here, we see that Paul gave thanks as he prayed for Philemon. We also see that Paul regularly included Philemon as he prayed for Christians in other areas. Our prayer life for others who serve the Lord in other places probably tells us a lot about our own spiritual maturity. Paul prayed for the Christians in every city where he had taken the Gospel over the years. Paul wrote in 2 Thessalonians 1:3, “We are bound to thank God always for you, brethren, as it is fitting, because your faith grows exceedingly, and the love of every one of you all abounds toward each other.” This is a great example for us and our children.

Paul also tells us that he regularly asked others about the Christians these people knew. As a result, Paul could say that he heard about the love and faith that Philemon had for the Lord and for all of the other Christians. Here, we see a real picture of the concern that Paul had for other Christians. That concern included both a personal interest and continual prayer for other Christians. Their love and faith was not just directed toward the Lord. Their love and faith for the Lord also caused them to have a strong love and faith for other Christians. In John 15:12, Christ said, “This is My commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.” Philemon certainly demonstrated this love for other Christians.

The word that is translated “sharing” is usually translated “fellowship”. That is the way this word is translated in 1 John 1:6-7, where we read, “If we say that we have fellowship with Him, and walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. But if we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin.” True fellowship with Christ will also cause us to have fellowship with one another and to share our lives with one another. The word that is translated “effective” is translated by the word “powerful” in Hebrews 4:12 where we read, “For the word of God *is* living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart.” Since Paul was going to ask Philemon to forgive Onesimus, he knew that the action that he was going to request of Philemon would send a powerful message to the entire church.

Here, we are reminded that our actions often say much more than our words. The word that is translated “acknowledgement” is usually translated “knowledge”. Colossians 3:10 says, “And have put on the new *man* who is renewed in knowledge according to the image of Him who created him.” As a result, this word speaks of full knowledge of the truth. Paul was offering Philemon an opportunity to show his understanding of the Word of God by the way that he would choose to act on the request of Paul. Paul had received great joy and encouragement by the love that Philemon had shown in the past. Paul said that was true of many other saints who had received great encouragement from the love of Philemon. We want to help our children understand that love has a great impact.

Philemon 1:8-11 says, “Therefore, though I might be very bold in Christ to command you what is fitting, *yet* for love’s sake I rather appeal *to you*--being such a one as Paul, the aged, and now also a prisoner of Jesus Christ--I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, whom I have begotten *while* in my chains, who once was unprofitable to you, but now is profitable to you and to me.” Paul knew that he could command Philemon to do what was right. However, in order to show true Christian love, Paul chose to appeal to Philemon instead of command him. Here, we see a very important key that we want to help our children clearly understand. A command often causes people to feel like they are being driven. An appeal is a request and so those who respond to such a request respond because they are led by the love shown by the way that the request is made. Christ said in John 10:3 that He calls His sheep by name and leads them out. We are to follow the example of Christ and lead by love instead of drive by fear.

Paul did several things to make it clear that his appeal was an act of love. He stated that he made the appeal for love’s sake. He said the appeal came from Paul the aged. He said that he was a prisoner of Jesus Christ. He stated that his appeal was for his son Onesimus. Onesimus was not a physical son but had become a spiritual son to Paul while Paul was a prisoner. As Paul talked to Christians throughout the Gentile world, he consistently spoke of the spiritual father-spiritual son relationship that he had with Christians that he led to the Lord and helped in their spiritual growth. 1 Corinthians 4:15 says, “For though you might have ten thousand instructors in Christ, yet *you do not have* many fathers; for in Christ Jesus I have begotten you through the gospel.” Here, we see what should be one of the key things in our own spiritual life as we lead people to Christ and help them grow to spiritual maturity. We want to lead them with the love and the example of a godly father. Our goal is to help them become spiritual “adult sons” and full partners in ministry.

Paul said that at one time Onesimus had been unprofitable to Philemon. Now, because of the changes that the Lord had made in the life of Onesimus, Paul said that he had become profitable both to Paul and to Philemon. As a slave, Philemon had stolen money from Philemon and run away to the city of Rome. That was why he had been unprofitable. Now, as one that Paul had led to Christ in Rome and helped to grow, Paul called him his spiritual son and said that he was now profitable to both Paul and Philemon. 2 Corinthians 5:17 says, “Therefore, if anyone *is* in Christ, *he is* a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new.” Instead of an unprofitable thief and slave, Onesimus was now a beloved brother in Christ. As we help our physical and spiritual children in their spiritual development, we want to help both them and those that they influence see that as Christians their lives are now profitable. We also want to help our children learn to follow the example of Paul as he appealed to Philemon rather than commanded him. May the Lord richly bless you as you help your children learn to have a much greater impact through their lives as they learn how to act in love to others.