

West Van Baptist, March 8
Philemon, Beloved Fellow-Worker
Philemon 1-25

Who was Philemon, anyway?

Today we finish a short 3-week series in the book of Philemon. The first week we looked at Onesimus, the run-away slave who was the reason for this letter. Onesimus met Paul, then he met Jesus; his life was changed and the prodigal returned home. Last week we turned our attention to Paul, the writer. Paul speaks very personally, showing us areas of growth in his own life as a follower of Jesus. Today, we'll think about the recipient of the letter: Philemon.

We know quite a bit about Paul's life. We know almost nothing about Philemon's.

- He lived in Colossae. (Colossians 4:9 tells us his slave Onesimus was from that city.)
- I picture Philemon as a sheep rancher and the owner of a fabric factory. I don't actually know that—it's just a guess. Wool was the primary industry in Colossae. If someone has a business in Whistler, it's probably related to sports or hospitality. In Colossae, there's a good chance that it would involve sheep and fabric. (The city's name literally means "purple wool.") But we don't know.
- We don't know that Philemon was wealthy. He owned slaves, and his home was large enough to host a church (Phlm 2), so it seems likely.
- We don't know whether Philemon did regular business in the port city of Ephesus. We do know that Paul and Philemon were friends and ministry co-workers. Paul served in Ephesus, not Colossae, so presumably that's where the 2 men met.
- Certainly, Philemon was a faithful Christian, actively involved in the Colossian church. He came to faith through Paul (v. 19), and we assume—but don't know—that he led his own household to faith.
- To be quite honest, we're not even sure Apphia was Philemon's wife. She could have been his sister or mother. She was obviously an important person in his household. Likewise, many people think Archippus was Philemon's son, since he's mentioned in the greeting. But he may simply be a close coworker in the church.

Everything we know about Philemon comes from the 25 verses of this short letter. We know almost nothing about the 'facts' of Philemon's life—where he came from, where he traveled, his business, how old he was, how many kids he had, how many sheep he owned. However, the letter tells us some important things about *the kind of person Philemon was*. That's where we will focus our attention this morning.

By the way, this is completely normal in the Bible. Scripture names many, many people. Only very rarely does it tell us much about the 'facts' of their lives: where they traveled, the things they did, their friends, their favorite pass-times, how many sheep they owned. We get a bit more information on a few: Abraham, Jacob, Moses, David, Paul. But even when the Bible tells stories about these famous individuals, it skips over decades of time, and leaves out all sorts of 'facts' that we would typically put in someone's biography today.

When the Bible talks about people, it focuses on their *character*—what kind of people they were—and on their *relationship to God*. Did they love Him? Did they trust and serve Him?

This may seem strange to someone who is new to the Bible. But really, it makes sense. You and I don't get much benefit from knowing how many sheep Abraham or Philemon owned. It's not relevant today. We *do* benefit by learning about the character of these people, the way they related to God, and what happened as a result.

This is important. It helps us to understand what God really cares about. He is interested in every aspect of our lives. Jesus tells us He knows how many hairs we have on our heads (Mat 10:30; Lk 12:7). But God is everywhere, so He's not fascinated by our travels. He rules and ultimately owns everything, so He's not impressed by the stuff we own. Our achievements don't impress Him, either—He is almighty. But God is deeply interested in what kind of person I am, what kind of person you are. And He cares whether we open ourselves up to a meaningful relationship with Him, or whether we push Him away and try to live as though He didn't exist. These are the things God is most concerned about, so of course they are the main things in His Word.

Well, that could be a whole sermon in itself. But for now, we're going to focus on the letter to Philemon. Specifically, I'd like us to consider the *kind of person* Philemon was, based on Paul's comments, and to think about what he has to teach us.

I. A loving heart

The name "Philemon" means "friendly person," or "affectionate one." Apparently his parents named him well. Three times in this short letter Paul refers to the love he sees in Philemon's life.

I hear about your love for all [God's] holy people ... (5)

Your love has given me great joy ... (7)

I prefer to appeal to you on the basis of love. (9)

We don't know whether Philemon was always an affectionate person by nature. But judging from Paul's comments, he certainly grew in love after becoming a follower of Jesus. That's good, because it is an incredibly important quality! You will remember that Jesus said the greatest commandments are to love God, and to love our neighbors (Mat 22; Mk 12; Lk 10). Paul makes the same point in 1 Corinthians 13 when he declares: *If I do not have love, I am nothing ... if I do not have love, I gain nothing (13:2-3)*.

In the Bible, love is more than just a feeling I have or a condition I "fall into." It is an expression of Christlike character that cares for others and seeks what is good for them. Philemon was demonstrating that kind of love in his relationships—with Paul, with the church, presumably with his family and others around him. He had a loving heart, and people noticed.

I'm told that most people aren't very good at describing someone they've only seen briefly. Unless we're trained to remember what we see, we don't do it very well. So, if a thief runs out of a store and the police interview witnesses, they hear very different descriptions. "He was tall. No, he was medium-short. He was fat. No, he was muscular. He had a big nose. Well, it was a wide nose, but not as noteworthy as his ears. Well, actually, the ears were normal, but I think he had blue eyes. Or maybe they were brown?"

But sometimes a characteristic stands out so much that everyone notices it. “The robber had no front teeth!”

We only get a short look at Philemon. But Paul emphasizes one unmistakable quality: he was loving. Ask a bunch of people who only knew Philemon a little, and we get the sense that they would all say the same thing: “He has a loving heart.”

I wonder: what would people say about me, if they could only remember one quality? What would they say about you? Would they say: “Well, I don’t remember much, but that person sure had a loving heart.” I can’t help thinking Jesus would like all of us to have hearts like Philemon’s.

II. A source of refreshment

Even when we have a clear, biblical understanding of what love is, it can still feel a little abstract. Fortunately, Paul tells us more about Philemon. He says: *Your love has given me great joy and encouragement, because you, brother, have refreshed the hearts of the Lord’s people* (7).

What a great image! We all understand exactly what it means to be refreshed. We’ve all had times when we were hot and tired and run-down, and we didn’t think we could go any further. Then we sat in a cool place, took a big drink, maybe had a bite to eat, rested a little, and started again, refreshed! It’s not hard to imagine what Paul is describing.

Some people are *not* refreshing to be around. I’ve known some folks (no one here, of course!) who drain the life out of me. I dread going to see them. The visit lasts far too long—no matter how long it is. When we part company, I’m always more tired, stressed, and upset than I was before. They just steal all joy away.

Fortunately, I also know some very refreshing people. I’m always excited to see them. I never get enough time with them. When we part, I always feel more joyful, more encouraged, more energized and hopeful than I was before. They’re like a cool drink of water on a hot day.

Being a “refreshing” person is not about having a bubbly, outgoing personality. Some outgoing people are exhausting; and sometimes shy and quiet people are very refreshing. It’s partly about people skills, but mostly about character. Refreshing people are loving. They are generous and thoughtful. They’re interested in others rather than being totally focused on themselves. They ask questions. They remember things you’ve told them. They have a positive outlook. Even if they’re sometimes down or they have to share bad news (which we all do), in general you can count on them to see and speak what is good.

Philemon “refreshed the hearts of the Lord’s people”—and I’m sure others enjoyed being with him.

This is a really important quality in the church. God calls us to “make disciples.” We can do many things to help make disciples: teaching, worshipping together as we have this morning, running various programs. But most of the disciple-making process doesn’t happen in giant groups, and it’s not about standing up and telling everyone, “You need to do this or that, or go that direction.” Most of disciple-making is walking with Jesus in the ordinary paths of life, and inviting others to join. “Come walk with me as I follow Christ.” This is very clear in Jesus’ own ministry, and we see it throughout the New Testament. Disciple-making mostly happens by sharing life together.

This means the best disciple-makers are “refreshing” people. And the best disciple-making churches are full of “refreshing” people. They are able to say, “Come walk with me as I follow Jesus,” and others *want to* join them, because it’s a delight to spend time with them. By contrast, it’s really hard to be an effective disciple-maker if I’m the kind of person others don’t want to be around.

Sometimes Christians wonder: “Why isn’t my church growing? Why aren’t people being changed? We have great preaching, exciting worship, and wonderful programs? Why aren’t others more interested?” There might be a number of reasons, but a common one is the lack of “refreshing” people. I’m so grateful to be part of a church where I find my brothers and sisters to be refreshing, sources of joy and encouragement. I want to grow in that quality. I pray that we all will.

After all, this is part of putting on the character of Christ. Remember what Jesus said to His disciples? *Come to me, all of you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light* (Mat 11:28-29). Jesus’ word “rest” is a slightly different version of the term Paul uses here for “refreshing.” Paul affirms Philemon, because in this area Philemon has been growing more like Jesus.

The Colossian church met in Philemon’s house. I suspect that when church members invited others to come join them at Philemon’s place, the natural response was: “That’s appealing! Philemon is a joy to be with.”

This got me wondering: if church met at my house, would that make people more eager—or less eager—to come and join? *Oh Lord, make me a more “refreshing” person, as Philemon was.*

After all, most of the church’s disciple-making doesn’t happen here in this room. It happens in our homes. In our work-places and schools, in the car, at the gym, in all the places we live our lives. May God continue to mold us into “refreshing” people, the kind of people others want to join as we walk with Jesus.

III. A partner that inspires confidence

Paul tells us one more thing about Philemon. On several occasions Paul describes him as a “partner.”

- He greets Philemon as *our beloved brother and fellow worker* (1).
- He prays that *the partnership that flows from [Philemon’s] faith* would be powerful and effective (6).
- And he appeals to Philemon: *If you consider me a partner, welcome [Onesimus]* (17).

The word Paul uses in 6 and 17 is *koinonia*—often translated as “fellowship.” *Koinonia* is a relationship in which several people work together and share resources to pursue a common purpose. Philemon isn’t just a pleasant person to be around. He is a valuable colleague; a comrade. He has embraced the mission of the church, and he is eager to work with Paul and with others to share the message of Jesus, to make disciples, to help the church into all it should be.

Of course, anyone who has played team sports, or been in business, or had other kinds of team-mates and partners will understand that some partners are good, and some are not-so-good. We live in a fallen world, full of fallen people. There are some partners that can't be trusted. They're not consistently honest, or perhaps they're well-meaning but not reliable. They don't get the job done. When you trust them they disappoint you.

In contrast, we all hope to find effective, reliable partners and team-mates: people who are honest, trust-worthy, dependable, who you can count on to do what they say they will do. Philemon wasn't just a partner—he was a reliable partner. His character and track record inspired confidence. So Paul says: *If you consider me a partner, welcome [Onesimus] as you would welcome me.... I do wish, brother, that I may have some benefit from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in Christ. Confident of your positive response to my request, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I ask* (17, 20-21).

Again, we don't know exactly what Philemon did in response to Paul's letter. I'm pretty sure he forgave Onesimus and welcomed him home. (Otherwise it's hard to imagine Philemon saving this letter and sharing it with the churches!) Did he do more? Did he grant Onesimus his freedom? Did he treat all of his servants differently after this event? We're not told. Paul's focus is on Philemon's character. This was a man who could be relied upon to do the right thing and to lead well. He wasn't perfect. But he was a partner in ministry who inspired confidence.

May God make us all good ministry partners, people who live in *koinonia*—in fellowship—serving our Lord together faithfully, knowing we can truly rely on each other.

IV. Therefore ...

I have one more quick comment on Philemon this morning. We've seen that he set a good example; he had positive character qualities that reflected Jesus and built up the church. Question: how did Philemon develop these qualities? What helped to make these seeds grow and bloom in his life? There are several hints in this letter, and most center around the word "therefore."

If you were here for the previous sermon series in Colossians, you may remember that I spent some time on this word. In Colossians (and in other letters like Romans and Ephesians), "therefore" comes right in the middle of the book. Paul teaches us truth—about who Jesus is, what He has done for us, who we are in Him—then Paul tells us that "therefore" we ought to live in a certain way that reflects these truths. Truths about God have implications for our lives.

This isn't just a theory. It has impacted Philemon's life. We see this in Paul's opening prayer.

This morning we read, *I always thank my God as I remember you in my prayers, because I hear about your love for all His holy people and your faith in the Lord Jesus* (4-5). At first glance, this translation makes it sound like we begin with "love" for the church, then we have "faith" in Jesus. But if we were reading this in Greek, the word order is different. Literally, Paul mentions "love and faith," then speaks about "the Lord Jesus and His people." The Greek order is more awkward in English, but it communicates something important. Paul puts love and faith together: there can't be faith without love, nor can love truly grow without faith. Then Paul sets up the sequence: faith in

Christ and love for Him is the source of our love for God's people and our faithfulness in serving them.

You see the point? *Because* Philemon has grown in faith and love for Jesus, *therefore* he has grown in love and faithfulness to Jesus' people. This is true for us as well. As we develop a trusting, submitting, loving relationship to Jesus, God's Spirit will form loving, trustworthy character in us. When there is spiritual life, *therefore* there will naturally be good fruit.

Paul develops this theme in the next verse. He says: *I pray that the partnership that flows from your faith will be energized in the knowledge of every good thing that we share in Christ.* Here again: our faith makes us partners, and that partnership is empowered and made even more effective as we come to understand better and better all that God has done for us in Jesus. The more clearly Philemon understands the truth, the more it will impact his life.

Several weeks ago we heard Paul pray the same thing for the Colossian church (1:9-12).

We continually ask God to fill you with the knowledge of His will through all the wisdom and understanding that the Spirit gives, so that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and please Him in every way; bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God, being strengthened with all power according to His glorious might so that you may have great endurance and patience, giving joyful thanks to the Father.

Putting it more simply: as you grow in a Spirit-given understanding of the truth, *therefore* you will live more and more the way God desires. This is how the Christian life works, and this is what has been transforming Philemon from the inside out.

Of course, this requires a humble, teachable spirit. If Philemon was the kind of person who said, "I don't like what Paul is telling me. I'm going to ignore his letter and burn it and treat my slave however I want," then the result would be very different. Onesimus would be punished, Philemon's heart would be hardened, the church would be disappointed, and we wouldn't have this wonderful epistle. Thank God Philemon was humble and teachable as well as loving, refreshing, and reliable!

V. Two funerals

Beth had a hard winter. She attended funerals for 2 old friends in a 2-week period. Both events were sad. They were also extremely different.

One friend was a well-known entrepreneur and civic leader. She was wealthy, widely-recognized, with a long resume of accomplishments—all spelled out in detail in a multi-page obituary. The second friend was a mom from the neighborhood. She didn't own much, hadn't traveled much, didn't have an advanced degree or a reputation for business. Her obituary was short and simple, and spoke mostly about the family left behind.

The funeral for Beth's wealthy friend was—not surprisingly—a beautiful affair. The venue was exclusive, and the list of participants was impressive. But what struck Beth most was how few people came—and how quickly they left when it was over. This friend achieved a lot in life. But she was a hard, unkind person who made her way to the top by climbing over others. Few people liked her. She had a long resume, and a very short list of attractive qualities.

The other event was surprisingly large and warm. Beth was amazed how many family members, friends, and other acquaintances came to pay their respects. They spoke about the legacy she left behind—which was almost entirely a collection of people her life had touched. There was little talk of what she did or owned or built, but many comments about what a warm, wonderful, giving person she was, and how delightful it was to spend time with her.

The letter to Philemon tells us very little about Philemon's accomplishments. We don't know where he traveled, what he owned, what important people he knew, or what he achieved in life. All we get are a few glimpses into his character. Yet those glimpses are impressive. Philemon was the kind of person I like to spend time with. He was the kind of person I want to be. He was the kind of person Jesus wants us all to be: a person with a loving heart; a source of joy and refreshment to everyone; a partner who inspired confidence. A person who understood the message of Jesus and who was learning to live out its implications.

Lord Jesus, You worked in Philemon to make him this way, by the power of Your Spirit. Please, would you graciously shape us more and more into Your image as well. For the sake of Your kingdom and Your name, Amen.