

Little Letters

Week 6

Philemon

When we read the bible, how do we hear it? What do you mean you say? Well, what emphasis do you place on it. Sometimes – How we read it gives us some different insight. Here is what I mean – Let's read the first bit with a happy disposition.

Greetings from Paul

¹ This letter is from Paul, a prisoner for preaching the Good News about Christ Jesus, and from our brother Timothy.

I am writing to Philemon, our beloved co-worker, ² and to our sister Apphia, and to our fellow soldier Archippus, and to the church that meets in your^[a] house.

³ May God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ give you grace and peace.

From reading it like that, we assume everything is honky dory, all is good. It is a letter to Philemon, a fellow Christian and the church that meets at his place. Now, we get a hint about the flow of the book here. The church that meets at his house. This is a rich dude if his house is big enough for a church!

Let's move on, but let's read the next bit as if it is addressed to an important person.

Paul's Thanksgiving and Prayer

⁴ I always thank my God when I pray for you, Philemon, ⁵ because I keep hearing about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all of God's people. ⁶ And I am praying that you will put into action the generosity that comes from your faith as you understand and experience all the good things we have in Christ. ⁷ Your love has given me much joy and comfort, my brother, for your kindness has often refreshed the hearts of God's people.

OK here we have a bit about how important Philemon is and how well he is respected. Paul has heard people say how good his faith is and how he loves everyone in the church.

He also seems to write that Paul is proud of these facts. He is proud of Philemon's reputation.

Now, what if, just what if this is buttering Philemon up. So how about we read the next bit with an element of sarcasm.

Paul's Appeal for Onesimus

⁸ That is why I am boldly asking a favor of you. I could demand it in the name of Christ because it is the right thing for you to do. ⁹ But because of our love, I prefer simply to ask you. Consider this as a request from me—Paul, an old man and now also a prisoner for the sake of Christ Jesus. ¹⁰

¹⁰ I appeal to you to show kindness to my child, Onesimus. I became his father in the faith while here in prison. ¹¹ Onesimus ¹¹ hasn't been of much use to you in the past, but now he is very useful to both of us. ¹² I am sending him back to you, and with him comes my own heart.

Ok you get my point here. And we start to understand more of the story and more of the issue. Paul is writing to ask a favour, but a favour which is a should be not a could be. He bungs it on a bit. Then gets to the issue.

He wants Philemon to be kind to Onesimus. Ok, that sounds easy enough but there is a back story here. Onesimus is a slave, actually, Philemon's slave

AND

He has run away to help Paul.

See the issue. Legally, Philemon can have Onesimus killed, put in chains, beaten or he could sell him. But Paul is saying – this guy has purpose. It appears he was not much of a slave. Look at v 11

¹¹ Onesimus ¹¹ hasn't been of much use to you in the past, but now he is very useful to both of us.

Now, we get the picture. Paul is appealing to Philemon as a Christian brother to do the right thing by this slave Onesimus. That is a tough call.

Now what's next? How do we read the next bit? Maybe a bit more sarcasm.

¹³ I wanted to keep him here with me while I am in these chains for preaching the Good News, and he would have helped me on your behalf. ¹⁴ But I didn't want to do anything without your consent. I wanted you to help because you were willing, not because you were forced. ¹⁵ It seems you lost Onesimus for a little while so that you could have him back forever. ¹⁶ He is no longer like a slave to you. He is more than a slave, for he is a beloved brother, especially to me. Now he will mean much more to you, both as a man and as a brother in the Lord.

Now, we really see where Paul is coming from. And I think we have set before us a principle of how to live as Christians. There is an element of equality here, an element of humanity, an element of pastoral care – Treat even a slave as a brother in Christ – Crikey, that would have been unheard of. That is truly a counter cultural concept.

So after laying down the heavy idea, How would Paul have read the next bit, maybe a bit softer, more personal.

¹⁷ So if you consider me your partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. ¹⁸ If he has wronged you in any way or owes you anything, charge it to me. ¹⁹ I, PAUL, WRITE THIS WITH MY OWN HAND: I WILL REPAY IT. AND I WON'T MENTION THAT YOU OWE ME YOUR VERY SOUL!

²⁰ Yes, my brother, please do me this favor^[d] for the Lord's sake. Give me this encouragement in Christ.

Now, this appears to be instructional, nearly a commanding.

V 20 is rhetorical jest. Maybe we read that softly and with sarcasm.

²⁰ Yes, my brother, please do me this favor^[d] for the Lord's sake. Give me this encouragement in Christ.

That probably continues with the next verse. (Soft and with Sarcasm)

²¹ I am confident as I write this letter that you will do what I ask and even more!

I think Paul is saying – You get the point don't you!!!!!!

But look at this bit, IS this a veiled threat so we read this With an air of threat.

22 One more thing—please prepare a guest room for me, for I am hoping that God will answer your prayers and let me return to you soon.

Paul is saying – I am coming to check this out – ok, do you get the picture – it's important that you get it. Is Paul giving a principle of checking up on people? Possibly.

Now, how about the final words, maybe Paul goes back to being sweet and nice.

Paul's Final Greetings

23 Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends you his greetings. 24 So do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke, my co-workers.

25 May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.

Now there are a couple of things here. Paul usually included greetings from those with him, yet here there is the feeling that “everyone knows I've sent this!!” Woe, this is a pretty tough letter and unlike the other small letters which predominantly dealt with false teaching and problems in the church, this deals with how we treat each other. Paul says in another letter

“There is no Jew or Greek, no freeman or slave we are all the same in Jesus.”

This is really making that point. How does it play out in our church? How does it play out for us personally in how we treat people? It is worth evaluating isn't it.

But look where we finish.

25 May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.

God's grace, Jesus grace be with your spirit – kinda saying Jesus grace affect your way of dealing with it.

Now, how do we say that?

Sarcastically - 25 May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.

Kindly 25 May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.

With authority - 25 May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.

With care 25 May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.

