

**Sermonettes on Philemon for the 15<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost - September 29<sup>th</sup>, 2019**  
**St. Paul's Ev. Lutheran Church – New Ulm, Minnesota – Pastor Nate Scharf**

**Devotion 1 – The Kingdom of Grace Grows in Human Hearts.**

**Philemon 1-7**

All our families are you unique with their own dysfunction and problems. As long as there is sin in the world and sinners (you and me), there will be problems. When someone comes to know their Savior and they realize what God did to save them and forgive them, it changes not just their way of life or their feelings or their priorities, it changes them first. God changes them. God changes you. Paul wrote to Philemon. It was an impactful letter that can only be understood by a changed man. As people changed by God, we understand. God brings us more and more out of our disfunction to discipleship. **The Kingdom of Grace Grows in Human Hearts.**

Philemon 1-7 (NIV11) *“Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, To Philemon our dear friend and fellow worker – also to Apphia our sister and Archippus our fellow soldier – and to the church that meets in your home: Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. 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. I pray that your partnership with us in the faith may be effective in deepening your understanding of every good thing we share for the sake of Christ. Your love has given me great joy and encouragement, because you, brother, have refreshed the hearts of the Lord’s people.”*

Paul preached in Ephesus for two years. Fellow workers also shared the message. The Gospel made it 100 miles east to Colosse, probably through the work of Epaphras. Hearts were changed, repentance worked by God to turn hearts from sin to trust in their Savior. God’s grace grew in the heart of Philemon, a convert, in Apphia – most likely his wife, and in Archippus – most likely their adult son. The love and support they poured out as changed people was well known. A church met in their home.

How many of you have hand-written a letter to someone this past year? Signing your name and a single phrase to a card does not count. Ok, how many have written more than 10 letters? You hand-write when you care deeply and take the time to convey that love, that care, that concern. Paul wrote from prison. He held these family members in the faith in his heart and cared about their growth in grace. His words were inspired by the Holy Spirit to address real life situations then and make real life applications today. Paul sends **Grace**, a word that means “God’s undeserved love,” or “the favor of God.” He sends them **Peace** – which is the end of the battle in their heart and soul wondering if God loves them or cares for them. Nail marked hands and spear pierced side remind them – they have peace with God.

Paul prayed for Philemon, his household and the church that met in their home. He thanked God for their partnership in the faith. As they shared it they would grow in their understanding of just how richly God has blessed his people. Their love in action in the family of believers and their faith refreshed Paul. When you hear about a fellow member or believer sharing their faith or acting in faith to help others or uphold others, it brings a smile to our faces and gratitude to our hearts. If we are the ones helped, or the ones privileged to help – even better! Sharing in this work of love, this partnership refreshes us. We grow in our understanding and expression of all the good things we have in Christ.

Is it more fun to read about basketball or to play it? Is it more fun to watch others play at recess, or would you rather be playing too? We live our faith together. We serve. We love. What great gifts we have in the faith God has given to us. Faith holds on to the sure Word of God, our Savior. We sing of this gift of faith which makes us family in Christ and upholds us in the words of hymn *I know my faith is founded*. During verse 2 children are welcome to come forward and join me on the stairs for the children’s message.

## Devotion 2 – The Kingdom of Grace Changes Hearts to Live in Love.

### Philemon 8-21

*Therefore, although in Christ I could be bold and order you to do what you ought to do, yet I prefer to appeal to you on the basis of love. It is as none other than Paul – an old man and now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus – that I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, who became my son while I was in chains. Formerly he was useless to you, but now he has become useful both to you and to me. I am sending him – who is my very heart – back to you. I would have liked to keep him with me so that he could take your place in helping me while I am in chains for the gospel. But I did not want to do anything without your consent, so that any favor you do would not seem forced but would be voluntary. Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back forever – no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother. He is very dear to me but even dearer to you, both as a fellow man and as a brother in the Lord. So if you consider me a partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. 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. 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.*

A good reference makes a difference. Whether you are applying for a job, or trying to get into school, or trying to convince someone you are trustworthy, or asking for something big like a loan, your reference can make all the difference. It did for Onesimus. It does for you and me.

**The Kingdom of Grace Changes Hearts to Live in Love.** God makes us useful. Left to ourselves we may learn how to navigate life, but we do not know how to love and serve really. According to our blind and dead sinful nature we only understand how to narcissistically think and speak, look and do for our own betterment or for others with some perceived pleasure or gain. But God changes our hearts to live. He gives them life. He turns the lights on in our hearts.

Onesimus was a slave. In Rome it may have been because of a debt or as a prisoner of war or some other means that he was enslaved, but what a raw deal, “I don’t deserve this,” Onesimus may have thought. “I am going to get/take/steal what I deserve.” Whether Philemon was good to him or not before he came to faith, truth is, Onesimus ran away. If Onesimus ever came back or was brought back, Philemon had the right to punish him, or worse.

God doesn’t treat us as slaves, though sometimes we consider ourselves slaves to Christ when we align our will to everything he says and does. God sees us as his children, but I know I’ve viewed God as a cruel task master and slave driver. “He doesn’t want me to have any fun,” I thought to myself on many occasions as a young person. “Why does God make it so difficult to live according to his commands! Will I have any friends left if I follow God’s ways.” Ever thought that? I have. “If God really knew anything about anything, he’d let me do this, have that, or give me a break.” “I’m just going to do it, take it, say it.” But what I often mistook for liberty was real slavery – to sin, to guilt, to more sin and lies, to shame. I traded freedom for actual slavery. I would do what I wanted. I trusted my feelings. I ignored God’s wisdom, his commands, and most importantly what stood behind all of it – his love.

We are sinful by nature from conception to the casket. I am a sinner, even a slave to sin. I’ve run away from God’s commands and from his good will for me. I’ve turned away from true freedom to shackle myself with guilt. I just couldn’t see it at the time because I didn’t care to listen to God’s Word, wait on God’s timing, or trust God to fulfill his promises to me. I deserve to be punished severely in this life, and I deserve to suffer eternally in hell.

Now we are back in God’s house. Onesimus was back at Philemon’s house. What would happen? Tychicus carried the letter for Philemon. In that letter, Paul, the one who had brought the message of Jesus Christ to that area which changed Philemon’s life and future, wrote his reference for Onesimus, *“If you consider me a partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. 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.”* If you want justice or revenge and retribution, Philemon, take it out on me, charge it to me, but spare this runaway slave. Only

welcome him as if he were me. Isn't this what Jesus did for you and me before God the Father? God is just and must punish sinners. Jesus said, "*charge it to me.*" And on the cross God did. The torments of hell – rejection by his Father, retribution, repayment, justice, God carried out in swift and shameful fashion. When all was paid, Jesus gave up his life. And Jesus' reference for us says to his Father, "*welcome them as you would welcome me.*" Jesus rose from the grave with power and authority to prove that God will and does welcome you as his own son, as his own daughter, because of our reference - Jesus Christ, our Savior.

Forgiven people are changed people. They do strange things. Runaway slaves become useful brothers. Slave owners accept their slaves as family, forgive them, and willingly send them to serve on their behalf. What causes this? A command? No. Love. God's love in Christ Jesus to sinners like us. God sees us as Paul saw Onesimus – "*(he) is my very heart.*" God has given you a changed heart to live in love. He has given you the reference that changed you and your future. Now live in love. Forgive. Let go of grudges and revenge. Serve. Do the hard things because of him who freed you. Find rest in his Word and guidance for your every thought, word and deed. Follow his commands. Bear the crosses of this life patiently knowing God loves you and has allowed them for a reason. Live to reflect the reference God has written for you. *You are his very heart.*

### **Devotion 3 – The Kingdom of Grace brings unity now and forever.**

#### **Philemon 22-25**

*And one thing more: Prepare a guest room for me, because I hope to be restored to you in answer to your prayers. Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends you greetings. And so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas and Luke, my fellow workers. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.*

This last week my brother encouraged me to get back into lifting. It is not impressive, but we are slugging our way through for about 25 minutes a few days a week. After the first day my muscles ached and hurt. As sit ups were attempted abs were not ripping, other things were. But even though lifting weights or running or any exercise may cause soreness or tiredness, it strengthens the body, the muscles, expands the wind capacity, helps your body, even though tiring and painful at the time. You would think we only had so much energy and expending it would only deplete our source. No, stamina is built as well as better health. So it is with love. Love that is moved to action and exercised in the family of believers does not weaken it. It exercises it. It makes it stronger in Christ!

Paul was asking a very big thing of Philemon – to forego his rights as a slave owner and Roman, with others watching, and probably other slaves wondering how this would go. Paul was fully confident that Philemon would not only do this – forgive Onesimus and welcome him as a brother in the Lord and as a man - but also, he would send him back to Paul to help him. Onesimus could serve with joy and without this unresolved relationship hanging over his head. Paul could receive this help in good conscience knowing Philemon approved and this was not behind his back. Paul was refreshed by this exercise of Philemon's love. Paul tells Philemon to *set up a guest room* for him. Paul couldn't wait to see his fellow believers he had heard so much about. And no doubt Philemon couldn't wait to see Paul. Mark, Aristarchus, Demas and Luke all sent greetings, as well as Philemon's old evangelist and probably Pastor, Epaphras. Mark, who wrote the gospel of Mark, Luke who wrote both the gospel of Luke and Acts, and Aristarchus and Demas – whom I know little about, but maybe Philemon knew more – these were his family in Christ as well, and yours too now.

**The Kingdom of Grace brings unity now and forever.** God works all this love and peace in human hearts because of Christ Jesus. The Holy Spirit works this through the Word. As our faith stretches and works out, it strengthens our unity now on earth in all the trials and hardships and disfunction. God prunes, grows and trims us as his disciples until the day we experience this full unity in heaven. We will see our Savior face to face. He brings us more and more from disfunction to disciples who love, forgive, intercede and follow his commands. Why? Because of what Jesus has done for us. So Paul closes his letter and our sermon with our source of peace and strength - *The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.* Amen.