

Letters For Leaders – Philemon (Part 1)

Today we begin a series called “Letters For Leaders.” Not just “Letters **TO** Leaders,” that is, to the people who actually received these documents 2000 years ago; but “Letters **FOR** Leaders,” that is, letters with timeless principles inspired by the Holy Ghost that still speak to leaders in every generation.

Your initial impulse might be to say, “Well, I’m not a leader.” But you would be wrong in the Biblical sense of leadership, because everyone influences someone else, and leadership IS influence. You may be a bad influence or a good influence, but you **ARE** an influence!

1 Corinthians 4:15-16 For though ye have ten thousand instructors in Christ, yet have ye not many fathers: for in Christ Jesus I have begotten you through the gospel. Wherefore I beseech you, be ye **followers of me**.

Philippians 3:17 Brethren, be **followers together of me**, and mark them which walk so as ye have us for an ensample.

1 Corinthians 11:1 Be ye **followers of me**, even as I also am of Christ.

The four letters we will study in this series were all written by the Apostle Paul, probably while he was in prison toward the end of his ministry. They are unique among all his writings because they are PERSONAL, addressed to individuals in leadership roles rather than to churches as a whole. Also, Paul has had a “mentoring role” in the lives and ministries of each of these young leaders, so he feels at liberty to speak freely. Here more than anywhere else we see Paul being transparent about ministry.

The letter to **Philemon** is the shortest of all Paul's writings. Philemon was a slave owner who also hosted a “church” (“ekklesia”) in his home. During the time of Paul's ministry in Ephesus, Philemon had likely journeyed to the city, heard Paul's preaching and became a Christian. He had a slave named Onesimus who robbed his master and ran away, making his way to Rome. We don't know exactly how he came in contact with Paul – perhaps he knew of Paul and sought him out, or perhaps he committed some other crime and ended up in prison with Paul. What we do know is that through Paul's witness Onesimus had now become a Christian. He was still the property of Philemon, however, and so Paul writes this short letter to smooth the way for his return to his master. While both Roman law and Jewish law gave Philemon the right to punish Onesimus severely, Paul asks Philemon to accept Onesimus as a brother in Christ and not merely as a slave. **He teaches Philemon the leader how to treat those who work for him, despite their failures.**

Philemon 1:1-3 Paul, a prisoner of Jesus Christ, and Timothy our brother, unto Philemon our dearly beloved, and fellowlabourer, And to our beloved Apphia, and Archippus our fellowsoldier, and to the church in thy house: Grace to you, and peace, from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

The apostle Paul made discipling the next generation his central focus. One-third of the New Testament was either written **to** Timothy or **from** Paul **and** Timothy (see the first verse of 2 Corinthians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 Thessalonians, 2 Thessalonians – and **Philemon**).

Philemon is a leader (“fellowlabourer”) in the church in Colossae (the church meets in his house), along with others mentioned in this letter ... **Apphia**, his wife (1:2) **Archippus**, another leader in the church at Colossae, maybe a son (1:2) **Epaphras**, another leader sent by the church to minister to Paul (1:23) **Onesimus**, Philemon's slave, and now a member of the church (1:10)

Colossians 4:17 And say to **Archippus**, Take heed to the ministry which thou hast received in the Lord, that thou fulfil it.

Colossians 4:12 **Epaphras, who is one of you**, a servant of Christ, saluteth you, always labouring fervently for you in prayers, that ye may stand perfect and complete in all the will of God.

Colossians 4:9 With **Onesimus**, a faithful and beloved brother, **who is one of you**. They shall make known unto you all things which are done here.

Notice that right from the beginning, Paul approaches Philemon on the basis of **RELATIONSHIP** (“dearly beloved, and fellowlabourer”) and not on the basis of **RULERSHIP**. John Maxwell has identified five levels of leadership, and why people follow at each level. **The LOWEST level of leadership is POSITION**. But Paul's ministry encompasses every level of leadership to Philemon, because he has mentored him.

- **POSITION (“rights”)** – people follow you because they **HAVE** to
- **PERMISSION (“relationships”)** – people follow you because they **WANT** to
- **PRODUCTION (“results”)** – people follow you because of what you have **DONE** for the **ORGANIZATION**
- **PEOPLE DEVELOPMENT (“reproduction”)** – people follow you because of what you have **DONE** for **THEM**
- **PINNACLE (“respect”)** – people follow you because of who you **ARE** and what you **REPRESENT**

Philemon 1:4-7 I thank my God, making mention of thee always in my prayers, Hearing of thy love and faith, which thou hast toward the Lord Jesus, and toward all saints; That the communication of thy faith may become effectual by the acknowledging of every good thing which is in you in Christ Jesus. For we have great joy and consolation in thy love, because the bowels of the saints are refreshed by thee, brother.

Notice what Paul says to Philemon BEFORE he makes his request, BEFORE he initiates a difficult and somewhat awkward conversation:

- “I pray for you consistently and thank God for you” (1:4)
- “I know you are a real Christian, and I hear this from others” (1:5)
- “I pray that your efforts are effective in reaching the lost” (1:6)
- “I know that your ministry is a real blessing to the church” (1:7)

I tell leaders all the time, “The conversation you most dread having is usually the conversation you most need to have!” But when you have that difficult conversation, make sure your spirit is right first!

Philemon 1:8-9 Wherefore, though I might be much bold in Christ to enjoin thee that which is convenient, Yet for love's sake I rather beseech thee, being such an one as Paul the aged, and now also a prisoner of Jesus Christ.

Paul could COMMAND Philemon to do what he wants (“enjoin thee”), but instead he makes an APPEAL to Philemon (“beseech thee”). He models for Philemon (and us!) the superiority of APPEALS over COMMANDS, when it comes to relationships in the church that are governed by LOVE.

The more RELATIONSHIP you have, the fewer RULES you need!

Acting out of FREEDOM from a heart of LOVE is the goal in every relationship. This applies to our relationships with others, and also to our relationship with God! To COMMAND would be “convenient” (1:8 – actually, the word means “befitting”), but because of his confidence in their relationship, Paul simply ASKS Philemon.

However, Paul doesn't make his request in a vacuum! He gently reminds Philemon WHY he should listen – Paul is an ELDER (“aged” – 1:9) and he has given his very LIFE for the gospel (“prisoner” – 1:9). He is not attempting to manipulate Philemon, but he is wanting to motivate him.

The principle of honoring our ELDERS is everywhere in the Bible. WHO do you respect so much that you will ALWAYS obey them just because of who they ARE in God and what they have DONE for God? If you can't answer that question, you are lacking an ELDER in your life!

Philemon 1:10-12 I beseech thee for my son Onesimus, whom I have begotten in my bonds: Which in time past was to thee unprofitable, but

now profitable to thee and to me: Whom I have sent again: thou therefore receive him, that is, mine own bowels:

Only after approaching Philemon on the basis of RELATIONSHIP does Paul now make his REQUEST. He asks Philemon to do something difficult – to FORGIVE Onesimus, who has wronged and deserted him. Paul calls this runaway slave his “son” (1:10), says that he is one of his converts (“begotten in my bonds” – 1:10), and says that sending Onesimus is like sending his own heart (“mine own bowels” – 1:12). “Remember, Philemon, you're dealing with another one of my **sons!** If you consider me your **father**, then Onesimus is one of your **brothers!**”

Leaders always put themselves on the line for people they believe in – even when others can't see their potential! Paul uses a clever play on words here. The name “Onesimus” means “profitable.” Paul admits that he has been “unprofitable” (1:11) to Philemon in the past, but now because of his conversion and maturity he is living up to his name! And Paul wants Philemon to benefit from his own experience ...

Acts 15:37-40 And Barnabas determined to take with them John, whose surname was **Mark**. But Paul thought not good to take him with them, who departed from them from Pamphylia, and went not with them to the work. And the contention was so sharp between them, that they departed asunder one from the other: and so Barnabas took Mark, and sailed unto Cyprus; And Paul chose Silas, and departed, being recommended by the brethren unto the grace of God.

2 Timothy 4:11 Only Luke is with me. Take **Mark**, and bring him with thee: for he is **profitable** to me for the ministry.

Paul learned that **PEOPLE CAN CHANGE**, and that when they do we have to be mature enough to see them in a different light. Don't ever imprison anyone in their past mistakes – God didn't do that to you!

2 Corinthians 5:17-18 Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a **new creature**: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new. And all things are of God, who hath **reconciled** us to himself by Jesus Christ, and hath given to us the ministry of **reconciliation**;

Paul “sent” Onesimus back to Philemon (1:12) because it was **right** in the eyes of the law, and because he wanted Philemon's decision to be **voluntary** rather than **compulsory**. But mostly, Paul wanted to see **reconciliation** between Philemon and Onesimus as brothers in Christ.

Philemon 1:13-16 Whom I would have retained with me, that in thy stead he might have ministered unto me in the bonds of the gospel: But without thy mind would I do nothing; that thy benefit should not be as it were of necessity, but willingly. For perhaps he therefore departed for a season, that thou shouldest receive him for ever; Not now as a servant,

but above a servant, a brother beloved, specially to me, but how much more unto thee, both in the flesh, and in the Lord?
Paul didn't make the mistake of quickly taking Onesimus' side, but rather watched and proved him over time, seeing both his conversion and his willingness to serve. In fact, now Onesimus is so valuable to the aging Apostle that he would love to keep him ("retained" – 1:13). However, because Onesimus belongs under the authority of Philemon (even though he rebelled against it), Paul SENDS him back! Today, that would not only honor what we call "ministerial ethics," but it would keep relationship problems from becoming all-out "wars" within God's family!
Onesimus has no right to remove himself from God-given authority – and even Paul the Apostle has no right to overstep that authority.

Paul reminds Philemon that he has been ETHICAL in this matter. He has not usurped Philemon's authority over Onesimus, and refused to make any decision regarding him without Philemon's permission ("without thy mind would I do nothing" – 1:14). Furthermore he wants Philemon to make his decision not out of pressure from Paul ("of necessity" – 1:14), but of his own accord ("willingly" – 1:14).

Even so, Paul reminds Philemon that God had a greater purpose – even through Onesimus' failure! Before he ran away he was just a "servant" (1:16), but now he is a "brother" (1:16). Before he ran away their relationship was only temporal ("for a season" – 1:15), but now it is eternal ("for ever" – 1:15). **God has totally changed Onesimus – but He also wants to change Philemon's ATTITUDE toward Onesimus!**
Paul reminds Philemon that, if he will see Onesimus in a different light, he will become "much more" valuable (1:16), not only as a servant ("in the flesh" – 1:16), but as a fellow servant of God ("in the Lord" – 1:16).

Now that Paul has made his CASE, he makes his REQUEST ...

Philemon 1:17-20 If thou count me therefore a partner, receive him as myself. If he hath wronged thee, or oweth thee ought, put that on mine account; I Paul have written it with mine own hand, I will repay it: albeit I do not say to thee how thou owest unto me even thine own self besides. Yea, brother, let me have joy of thee in the Lord: refresh my bowels in the Lord.

Notice how DIRECT Paul is with Philemon ...

- "If you see me as your partner in ministry" (1:17)
- "Receive him as you would receive me" (1:17)
- "I'll pay back whatever he owes you" (1:18)
- "I've committed myself in writing" (1:18)
- "You owe me much more than this!" (1:19)
- "I'm asking you to help me, not just Onesimus" (1:20)

"I know Onesimus deserves JUDGEMENT, but I'm asking for MERCY. I'm not asking as his LAWYER, I'm asking as his FATHER – and yours!"
"Philemon, how do you see me, treat me, relate to me, receive me? I'm asking you to treat your former slave and your new brother that way."

Notice that Paul never called for an overthrow of the system of slavery, yet the principles in his letter to Philemon destroy slavery. The greatest social changes come when people are changed, one heart at a time. Christianity didn't FIGHT slavery, but it eventually OVERCAME slavery.

Philemon 1:21 Having confidence in thy obedience I wrote unto thee, knowing that thou wilt also do more than I say.

Paul tells Philemon that he is confident not only in his OBEDIENCE, but in his JOYFUL OBEDIENCE, which always results in us doing MORE than God – or our leaders – ask of us! ("more than I say" – 1:21) Doing MORE than the minimum is the hallmark of a MATURE Christian, and certainly a necessary quality in any LEADER.

Philemon 1:22-25 But withal prepare me also a lodging: for I trust that through your prayers I shall be given unto you. There salute thee Epaphras, my fellowprisoner in Christ Jesus; Marcus, Aristarchus, Demas, Lucas, my fellowlabourers. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Amen.

Paul has confidence in the prayers of God's people, and hopes that he will be released from prison and be able to visit Philemon in person ("prepare me also a lodging" – 1:22). However, his faith in God is not dependent on always getting his prayers answered!

Philippians 4:11-13 Not that I speak in respect of want: for I have learned, in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content. I know both how to be abased, and I know how to abound: every where and in all things I am instructed both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need. I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me.

He closes his letter by mentioning Epaphras, Marcus, Aristarchus, and others. These names are also mentioned in the conclusion of his letter to the Colossian church (Colossians 4). It's probable that Tychicus and Onesimus delivered both letters at the same time (Colossians 4:7-9).

Paul also mentions Demas (1:24), who is a "fellowlabourer" at this point. But Demas will later backslide and fall into worldliness. That's a warning to ALL of us as leaders! **Guard your ministry by guarding your heart!**

2 Timothy 4:10 For Demas hath forsaken me, having loved this present world, and is departed unto Thessalonica; Crescens to Galatia, Titus unto Dalmatia.