

Dear Friends,

Abraham Lincoln is one of my special "Heroes" from our country's history. He served as President during likely the most violent and divisive era in our country's history. However, rather than promoting more contention and violence, Lincoln worked long and hard to quiet it. After the Civil War ended, Lincoln was far easier on the South than many thought he should be. When asked to explain his kind approach to restoring a unified country, including the southern states that had seceded, Lincoln replied, "The best way to defeat your enemy is to make him your friend." We need his lesson today oh so much.

A careful study of Paul's letter to Philemon models this attitude as Paul's approach to resolving a sharp divide between Philemon and Onesimus. During my business career, I observed a similar gracious resolution to a tense problem. A friend was an administrator for the public school district where I worked at the time. Without intending to do so, my friend did something that especially could have

reflected badly on one of the district's elementary principals. As soon as my friend realized the inadvertent difficulty he had created for the principal, he asked his secretary to phone the principal and schedule a meeting with him. The principal entered the meeting red faced and fuming. Before he could say a word, my friend acknowledged the problem, apologized, and assured the principal that he would do whatever might be necessary to prevent any bad fallout to the principal. The principal stood up, started pacing back and forth in my friend's office, and cursing as he stared at the floor. Finally he sat back down and spoke to my friend, "You make it so hard to stay mad at you!" Would that each of us would be so prompt and thorough in our efforts toward each other when painful differences surface.

When difficulties arise between believers, each of them--each of us--should take immediate steps, as my friend did, to make things right, We need to make it so hard, so very hard, for them to be mad at

us. In a wise and gracious manner, Paul accomplished this goal with Philemon in this letter. This letter can teach us much kind wisdom and grace in our dealing with difficult people and difficult issues in our faith.

Lord bless,
Joe Holder

Philemon

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: 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?

(Philemon 1:10-16 KJV)

The setting of Paul's letter to Philemon provides wise examples and teaching regarding those difficult situations in which Biblical faith and the culture of our broken world do not agree. Onesimus was a former slave of Philemon who ran away and apparently tried to disappear in a big city. However, by the Lord's kind providence, he encountered Paul, Philemon's dear friend in the faith. He was convicted by Paul's preaching and became a faithful follower of Jesus. How could Paul resolve this sticky problem between Philemon and Onesimus? Easy; follow the way of grace and trust the Lord to work out the problems we can't "Fix."

Critics of Biblical Christianity occasionally throw sharp barbs against those early believers for various "Social injustices." Why didn't they openly oppose these issues? Critics choose to ignore that God has His own time and way of dealing with sin. Roman government of the first century was liberal with

existing religions of captured people and cultures, but they were fierce in their dealing against any “New religion.” Christianity’s critics tried to convince the Romans that Christianity was a new religion. If they succeeded, the Romans would wipe them out. Rome also threw its powerful weight unrelentingly against any opposition to their own cultural habits. Had early Christians openly opposed any of the Roman customs of the day, the Romans would have quickly destroyed them.

Critics also choose to ignore that the basic and uncompromising message of the gospel those early Christians preached—and lived—set the stage to eradicate many of the Romans’ accepted practices, slavery included. “...**for ye are all one in Christ Jesus.**” (Galatians 3:28b KJV) As the faith of Jesus grew and spread throughout the Roman Empire and beyond, this message quietly undermined the whole social caste system that existed in the Roman Empire. Wisdom quietly reminds us, “It is better to win the war than to win only one battle.” And Jesus won, as He always does. Throughout human history, fallen, broken, sinful humanity has introduced

one cruel inhumanity after another against those less able to resist. In each case, in the end and often in unusual and unexpected ways, Jesus won the day. Depraved humanity shall continue to follow the evil, and shall “...wax worse and worse,” (2 Timothy 3:13 KJV) but the final chapter of humanity shall witness the ultimate victory of “The Lamb” who shall prove also to be “The Lion” who overcomes and destroys evil.

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. (Philemon 1:8-9 KJV)

Paul's letter to Philemon provides wise counsel in our dealing with real problems among believers. All too often in today's church culture, our own included, well-meaning folks who sincerely believe they are right, are “Heavyhanded” in their demands that other believers follow them almost lock-step, “Or else.” We all, but especially folks with this inclination, need to spend serious study time

with this letter. Biblical faith doesn't politely ignore error, but the New Testament teaches us **how** to deal with error. We correct it by teaching and example, not by coercion.

God knows humans far better than they know themselves. If you force change onto humans from the "Top down," from a powerful authority figure, you seldom change hearts, so whatever compliance you accomplish will be superficial. The Spirit guided the Lord's people through those early centuries to preach powerfully, to direct people to their God and Savior. In short, He changed them from within, a true change, not mere superficial coercive compliance. Governments can pass laws that seem noble and good, but laws don't change the human heart, so often, despite laws on the books, the problems addressed in those laws linger unchecked. However, when Jesus changes a human heart, the change is transformative. He can make the problem go away in the lives of those whom He touches with grace.

Wherefore, though I might be much bold in Christ to enjoin thee that which is convenient. “Convenient” here refers to what is right. Paul reminds Philemon, a beloved and respected brother in the faith, that he could have “Played the apostle’s card” and imposed an authoritarian mandate onto Philemon regarding this problem with Onesimus. Pastors, be wise, reserved, and cautious not to play your “Pastor’s card” and coerce the members of the church you serve to your will. New Testament is unquestionably clear; the Lord teaches us to exercise our “Oversight” or leadership in the church only in a specific manner.

*Neither as being lords over God’s heritage, but **being examples** to the flock.* (1 Peter 5:3 KJV)

Deacons, the same kind example mandate applies to you as to the pastors. Paul reminds Philemon that he could have taken the authoritative path and commanded Philemon’s response to the situation, but he didn’t. How then did Paul interact with Philemon?

I beseech thee for my son Onesimus, whom I have begotten in my bonds.

To beseech is to plead with someone, to request something earnestly. Paul also informs Philemon that something has changed in the dynamic between him and Onesimus. The former servant not only encountered Paul; he also encountered Jesus. Not only did that change everything for Onesimus; it also changed everything for his relationship with Philemon. Godly faith does not erase our past or remove all personal responsibility from us, a faulty attitude too often adopted in the Christian culture. Paul intervenes with Philemon as he already taught Onesimus. He works with both men to face a touchy past and to **responsibly and graciously** resolve their past problem. Some things in our past we simply cannot erase, but we should strive to honestly face them and, at least, acknowledge our present repentant attitude toward those sins, as Paul often did regarding his past persecution of Christians.

Slavery of one human being by another is a heinous sin. Scripture teaches that believers are all one in Christ, not one lording himself over others. Rather than allowing or tolerating this sin, Paul's letter to Philemon shows us the godly way to eradicate it in our lives. By reminding Philemon of Onesimus' embracing Jesus and the faith of the gospel, Paul puts both men on the level turf at the foot of the cross. We all need to live our lives on that turf.

...thou therefore receive him, that is, mine own bowels: 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. How could Philemon not respond to Paul's message with grace? Rather than address the sinful past situation between the two men, Paul highlights the present new spiritual relationship between them. Even so, he pleads with Philemon to willingly accept Paul's teaching and now his new brother in Christ?

I was born and raised in a part of this country that practiced human slavery some 150 years ago. Although the practice was long ended by my time, the culture retained many vestiges of that era. Human equality was not commonly practiced. As with us today, that culture could have wisely benefitted by a soul-searching practice of Paul's letter to Philemon. In fact, few human cultures exist that could not be transformed by this lesson. When anger or hate rules a person's life, they fail this lesson. If disagreement exists—as it always does—we need to learn to deal with it in grace, as Paul with Philemon in this letter. Never coerce another believer. Plead with them for willing obedience. Only by the gracious practice of Paul's teaching to Philemon can we ever realize the reality of our faith in Jesus. A gun doesn't solve our problem. Polarized paranoia does not solve our problem. Hating those who disagree with us does not solve our problem.

Christians can't transform the culture in which we live into a "Christian nation." We can only transform our own lives and pray that the

Lord give us grace to follow His way and wisdom in our dealing—gracious dealing—with the people in our lives.

As a pastor, I have sadly observed the reluctance of one believer with a complaint against another believer to practice Jesus' simple and clear teaching in Matthew 18:15-20. Failure to practice Jesus' teaching in these verses predicts that we also refuse to practice Jesus' reply to Peter's question that followed this lesson.

Then came Peter to him, and said, Lord, how oft shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? till seven times? Jesus saith unto him, I say not unto thee, Until seven times: but, Until seventy times seven. (Matthew 18:21-22 KJV 1900; emphasis added)

We conveniently (For our carnality) fail to grasp the relationship between Jesus' teaching in verses 15-20 with verses 21-22. Jesus' teaching in those verses prompted Peter's question—and Jesus' answer. And the whole lesson confronts us. On what reasonable and

moral basis do we think it is acceptable to the Lord for us to utterly ignore any part of His teaching? A man who has served as pastor for any length of time has heard, "That idea simply doesn't work. I tried it once, and it didn't work for me." You may have gone through the superficial form, but you didn't truly do what Jesus taught. When we go through the motions and fail, the time is ripe to look within. Did we approach our brother or sister as their brother or sister, or as an angry warrior? Did we approach them with the ironclad attitude of "I'm right, you are wrong, and you must agree with me, or else" attitude? Or did we nurse such deep anger toward them that we simply chose to wholly ignore Jesus' teaching and make no effort whatever to resolve our problem? If we think we can use our own angry words to control our brothers and sisters, frightening them into doing what we want, are we not effectively attempting to subject them, in pseudo-slavery, to our power? When we refuse to follow Jesus' teaching, we say far more about our own spiritual health than about the other person.

Respect for Jesus that begins with a time of personal soul-searching before I go to my brother or sister will often resolve our complaint which might reside within our own heart more than in theirs. If we refuse to follow Jesus' words regarding interpersonal conflict, how can we possibly obey His teaching on transforming forgiveness? No, your offending brother or sister will not always repent. Jesus didn't say they would. But He did teach us to follow His teaching whether the other person changes or not.

Paul's letter to Philemon takes us far, far beyond the ungodly past when Philemon followed more the sinful practice of the day than his faith in Jesus. It takes us above the ungodly habit of Onesimus to run away from our problems and think that will make them go away. It confronts our carnal inclination to conveniently to-our-own-carnal-disposition ignore any part of Jesus' teaching. In the end, it shows us the lifetransforming reality of authentic Christian faith. Are we truly ready for it?

Elder Joe Holder