

The Wisdom of Tenderness | Philemon

The Only Begotten Slave

Colossians 1.3-6; Philemon 1.8-16

8.13.23

(Colossians 1.3-6) We give thanks to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, praying always for you, ⁴ since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and the love which you have for all the saints; ⁵ because of the hope laid up for you in heaven, of which you previously heard in the word of truth, the gospel ⁶ which has come to you, just as in all the world also it is constantly bearing fruit and increasing, even as it has been doing in you also since the day you heard of it and understood the grace of God in truth...

(Philemon 1.8-16) Therefore, though I have enough confidence in Christ to order you to do what is proper, ⁹ yet for love's sake I rather appeal to you-- since I am such a person as Paul, the aged, and now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus-- ¹⁰ I appeal to you for my child Onesimus, whom I have begotten in my imprisonment, ¹¹ who formerly was useless to you, but now is useful both to you and to me. ¹² I have sent him back to you in person, that is, sending my very heart, ¹³ whom I wished to keep with me, so that on your behalf he might minister to me in my imprisonment for the gospel; ¹⁴ but without your consent I did not want to do anything, so that your goodness would not be, in effect, by compulsion but of your own free will. ¹⁵ For perhaps he was for this reason separated from you for a while, that you would have him back forever, ¹⁶ no longer as a slave, but more than a slave, a beloved brother, especially to me, but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord.

This Letter to Philemon is a kind of case-study from the life of the early Christian Church; IT works out and applies to an actual case, a real-life situation, it applies the ideas we've been discussing in our recent series on emotional/spiritual health.

This is one segment of a larger story...and by adding up the clues we think a Christian named Philemon who'd been converted through the preaching of the Apostle Paul, that man (Philemon), a wealthy Colossian and a slave owner had a runaway slave and somehow that slave, Onesimus, later, met up with the jailed Apostle Paul and he too became a Christian.

This letter is St. Paul's plea to the master (Philemon) to forgive this slave (Onesimus) and RECEIVE HIM not simply as a slave but as a brother... and perhaps even to release Onesimus so that he could become a useful assistant to Paul who was in prison.

Last week, we asked a provocative question, i.e., "How can you get people to do what you want them to do?" (Listen online if you missed that). We didn't exactly answer the question except to say, "It's the wrong question – the actual issue is, 'What really IS your aim in life?'" For Paul (and, as we saw, George Müller) the real issue is, "How can I celebrate and promote the grace of God in Christ so that I and even others would see it and be in awe of God for it?"

TODAY, we ask a follow up question, namely, ***“What’s more important: to do the right thing with a bad attitude or not to do the right thing but with a good attitude?”*** (*Uninvolved but sweet or engaged but with a sour attitude?*) *Which one would you prefer in a friend...in yourself?*

Second, how can you tell if YOUR attitude is bad?

Third, what to do about bad attitudes in doing good?

When scholars started to apply literary theory or “form” criticism to the Bible, they discovered some pretty amazing things. Even though the Christian Church had always received these writings as the Word of God, Scripture is also the work of human authors. And one very common literary device used by these ancient writers is called the “chiasm” (See Nils Lund, *Chiasmus in the New Testament: A Study in the Form and Function of Chiastic Structures*; 1942).

A sentence or paragraph, a poem or even a whole book is structured so that the beginning of the unit mirrors the end of the unit. It’s symmetrical. And when the “chiastic structure” is made up of an odd number of elements, it moves the attention of the reader to the middle of the work, like a peak or hinge. The start builds to it and the end stems from it. In the *Letter to Philemon*, that hinge verse is v. 14:

“but without your consent I didn’t want to do anything, that your goodness should NOT be as it were by compulsion but of your own free will.”

In other words, says Paul, *“I only want you to DO what YOU want to do, and if you don’t WANT to do it... if you aren’t into it (as we might say) then I don’t want you to do it...”*

“If your heart isn’t IN this...I won’t force you...I could ... v.8 *“I have enough confidence in Christ to order you to do what’s proper”* i.e. I know that by God’s grace and His calling, I am an Apostle... I’ve been given authority (“the keys of the Kingdom”) *“yet for love’s sake I rather appeal to you”* – not order but appeal!

WHY? Not because I have no authority, after all, I am Paul, the aged (the experienced!) and a prisoner of Jesus Christ – i.e. I really belong to Jesus Christ ...I know who I am and I’m secure in that...

But it’s SO important to me that you have the right attitude – that you actually want to do this – that if you’re not willing and are not moved by love, I’m not going to pressure you or force you... I won’t treat you like a horse or mule (Ps. 32.9) that has to be bridled and spurred and ridden (Ps 32.9) ...

It’s the hinge of the book. It’s thĒ lesson and thĒ focal point. It all leads to this conclusion, thĒ moral of the story!

How important is it *that we have the right attitude* when it comes to obedience and to doing the right thing?... In Paul's mind, it's supreme!

And the Bible is full of teachings and examples of this very lesson. A man wants to be filled with the Holy Spirit like the Apostles...that's good, right? So, he offers to pay them for that blessing (wrong attitude) and he's cursed for it. (Acts 8.20) People in the churches of Galatia are striving to be super obedient but... *so that they could earn salvation* (wrong motivation) and Paul says, "They are cursed!" (Gal. 1.8)

A woman hosts Jesus Christ in her home. She makes it all perfect and so lavish and lovely... *and then she gets angry that no one's helping her with the serving* (wrong attitude) and Jesus Christ calls her on it! (Luke 10. 38ff)

Jesus Christ says, "If you pray and fast and give away your money to the poor" (all really good stuff...right?) *but you do it in order to get people to respect you* (a self-serving attitude)... *then it's all without merit.*

AND HERE... the Apostle Paul says THESE words which look so sweet and charming but on second look are hard words, "*And if I give all my possessions to feed the poor, and if I deliver my body to be burned, but do not have love, it profits me nothing*". 1 Corinthians 13.3

Again we want to ask, "why would anyone give away his possessions or his very life if not because he/she loved God and loved people?" Paul is saying, "There's no action that is intrinsically good but that any behavior can be corrupted by a wrong attitude. Apparently moved by radical generosity and impeccable integrity...sold out to your convictions and willing to die ...for the cause, for your nation, for your kids, for your faith AND moved by self-promotion, not love.

And when he comes to pleading for this runaway slave...it's the right thing that Onesimus should be forgiven or even set free, but Paul will not have the right behavior at the expense of the wrong motivation or attitude. NOT by compulsion (it's the nucleus of the whole letter) ...It must be, v.9 "for love's sake" and v. 14 "NOT by compulsion!"

Now, suppose that sparks something in you. Maybe you think, "Really? I thought it was just important to do the right thing. I was always taught that you should obey whether you feel like it or not...get up and go to work ... study hard even if you don't want to (it'll pay off) ...obey your parents even if you don't agree or don't feel like it ...eat your lima beans – they're good for you!...Pay your tithes – Go to church... call home on the weekends...whether you FEEL it or not!"

So, what is this strange teaching that has come to our ears? Could I have been doing the right things all these years *but for the wrong reasons*...the wrong motivations/attitude?... HOW CAN I EVEN KNOW?

Well, how DO you know? Let me suggest a few ways to discern your own attitudes for doing the right thing and HOW TO KNOW IF THE HEART IS WRONG:

#1 – Paul indicates here that mere pressure is inadequate. “**NOT as it were by compulsion**” and that word simply means pressure. All the things we talked about last week in what we called the *reward and punishment system*: nagging, fear, guilt, peer-pressure, keeping-up-with-the-Joneses, shame and the desire to get some reward for yourself (some form of appreciation or recognition).

BUT the question is: *if and when the pressure is withdrawn, WILL you continue to do the right thing?* That’s a good question to ask yourself. When no one’s there to see or if no one will possibly find out about this “good deed”, would I still do it?

#2 Am I mindless in what I am doing? In other words, am I doing this thing just...because we’ve always done it that way? Paul told Philemon in the core verse (v.14) “**not without your consent**” and that word implies thought and deliberation.

He gives Philemon some rationale and he wants HIM to make a decision – don’t sort of “*go with the flow*”. The Pharisees in Jesus Christ’s day were like this...doing things just because it was the tradition.

It’s a good thing that we be purposeful and when asked “Why do you do that?” and we struggle to answer, it’s a signal: may be the right thing but with the wrong attitude. It’s a deliberate approach to life.

#3 We need help in discerning our own motives by what people around you are “feeling” from your good deeds. *Is there a “bass-note”, a kind of vibe sounding from your supposed good deeds?*

It’s a tricky thing because it can turn into “people pleasing” and that’s one way to get your motives messed up... But Paul brings people into this decision with Philemon – he mentions the man’s wife and son and their church NOT to shame or pressure him but so that Philemon will see himself as a part of a community, a Body. We need others to help us see ourselves and our motives...it’s like seeing your eyes...you can’t do it without the help of a mirror...and often people ARE that mirror for us.

In the book ***The Four Loves*** C.S. Lewis writes about a woman named Mrs. Fidget who died a few months ago. She was the perfect wife and the perfect mother. Her whole identity was found in caring for her kids, her husband and even her pets. Everyone who knew her always said, “She lives for her family.”

She always made her family a hot meal (even when they would’ve preferred sandwiches). She always made their clothes (even when they would rather buy clothes) because “that’s what a good mother does” ... She always waited up til they all get in bed (even when it’s very, very late... her adult children can count on her meeting them at the door with that look of grateful relief and the bass-note of self-sacrifice). She is living for her family! Even when she takes her grown daughter to the doctor, she insists on hearing any diagnosis from the doctor first (IN PRIVATE) because “we don’t want to upset her.”

And because she was living for her family and “working her fingers to the bone” ... her family felt compelled to help her... to help her to help them... Not that they really wanted all that help but... they

just couldn't stop her. So, they were always helping her...sort of enslaved to her... because she was so very busy living for her family.

Since her death... the daughter has purchased quite a few dresses and is taking riding lessons... Even the dog who was never allowed out except on a leash is now a well-known member of the lamp-post Club on their road".

The story ends with these tragic words, *"The Vicar says Mrs. Fidget is now at rest. Let us hope she is. What's quite certain is that her family members are."* She did the right things but for the wrong reasons. Her family felt it...but they couldn't tell her because externally it all looked perfect. There was a bass-note, a vibe, always a *whiff* of control in her "love".

And that's it: we need to listen. We can go far down the road convinced that we're loving others...can go our whole lives convinced that we mean well, when in fact, other people are being hurt by our "love"; doing the right things NOT for the happiness and welfare of others but just because we're trying to measure up to a picture of a good dad or a friendly neighbor or an excellent employee, a *desperate search for affirmation driven by a need to feel good about ourselves.*

SO HOW WAS PHILEMON TO BE MOTIVATED AND HOW CAN WE DO THE SAME?

Well, the *Letter to the Colossians* (Philemon's hometown) begins in a way almost identical to this letter. Paul says to both groups, "I thank God...praying for you SINCE I heard of your faith in Christ Jesus AND the love you have for all the saints."

It's not just a nice way to start a letter; it's Paul saying, "This is the thing that makes all the difference and when I heard it was in you, I knew that you had the possibility of being motivated in the new way – faith in Jesus Christ is the way that we receive grace AND GRACE ENABLES US TO LOVE WITH NO STRINGS ATTACHED.

When a person starts believing that Jesus Christ lived and died for me...He obeyed for me and His record of obedience is credited to my account... He has taken this slave and set me free...I WAS a slave but I've been reborn a son... in His death Jesus paid for my sins... This news, the Gospel, is bearing fruit in me and others – and I want to see more of it!

Therefore, I don't have to obey out of some slavish desire to get God to like me...He already delights in me, as a Father delights in his own child,...and if I have God's delight and the applause of heaven... I don't need the applause of people to feel good about myself.

This frees me to do things out of a new and unique motive...I am becoming in practice what God has declared me to be...I am in a sense pressing on to my true purpose and end for which I was created ("because of the hope laid up for you in heaven..." Col. 1.5) ... I can love w/o the need to be recognized or affirmed or rewarded. Finally, I can love and give with no strings attached. Paul wanted to see the POWER of the Good News as the engine in his friend Philemon.

Now, do we ever really have motives 100% free from selfishness and that are only love? Well, I think we all struggle with this to one degree or another.

And when we find ourselves saying, "I'm really NOT doing this for the right reason." There are times when we have to say, "*I have to stop doing this good thing...at least for a time.*"

Mostly though we'll say, "I don't feel like loving...or forgiving...or obeying... helping... or listening BUT I know it's the right thing to do...SO as I do it, I repent and believe and simply tell God, 'Father, I am acting like a slave right now (compelled!) but in reality, I'm a son and NOT a slave.'"

I ask God to remind me of the new me and the present power of the Gospel to liberate our wills to obey from the heart – to bear the fruit of LOVE.

Help me walk in the obedience of a son because of what Jesus Christ has done for me."

If we can pray that sincerely, it changes our marriages, our workweek, our school life, our parenting, the way we face pain...and traffic and everything else in our daily routines.

Q U O T E S

This Epistle gives us a masterly and tender illustration of Christian love; for here we see how St. Paul takes the part of poor Onesimus and advocates his cause with his master all that he can and acts no differently than if he were himself Onesimus, who has done wrong. And yet he does this, not with force or compulsion, as was his right, but he lays aside his rights and thus compels Philemon, also, to waive his rights. What Christ has done for us with God the Father, that St. Paul does for Onesimus with Philemon.

For Christ laid aside His rights and overcame His Father with love and humility, so that He had to put away His wrath and His rights and receive us into favor, for Christ's sake, who so earnestly advocates our cause and takes our part so tenderly. For we are all his Onesimi if we believe.

– Martin Luther (1546), *Works of Martin Luther Translated with Introductions and Notes Volume VI*, by A. J. Holman Company and The Castle Press, 1932.

For Mrs. Fidget, as she so often said, would "work her fingers to the bone" for her family. They couldn't stop her. Nor could they--being decent people--quite sit still and watch her do it. They had to help. Indeed they were always having to help. That is, they did things for her to help her to do things for them which they didn't want done...

The Vicar says Mrs. Fidget is now at rest. Let us hope she is. What's quite certain is that her family are.

– C.S. Lewis, *The Four Loves* (CH 3: Affection); 1960