

## **PHILEMON: HOW TO ADDRESS CONTROVERSIAL MATTERS AMONG YOUR CHRISTIAN FAMILY WITH RESPECT.**

The book of Philemon is very brief and sometimes overlooked, but it has several very important practical applications that are presented in a very simple didactic manner. Today we will use this book for helpful advice about how to talk to your brothers and sisters about controversial material.

### **OVERVIEW OF PHILEMON:**

#### **The background (1:1-2):**

- At some time during his teaching campaigns, Paul met Philemon. They developed a spiritual relationship of admiration and dependence.
- Paul writes this letter because he has a request of Philemon.

#### **The issue:**

- Philemon had a servant named Onesimus.
- Onesimus ran away from his master costing him money and labor.
- While in prison, Paul meets Onesimus and converts him to Christ.

#### **The request:**

- Paul is requesting that Philemon forgive this servant who had wronged him, and accept him back as a servant and Christian brother.

#### **The ramifications:**

- Philemon might have difficulty forgiving Onesimus.
- The church might have difficulty forgiving Onesimus.
- Onesimus might be afraid to return to his master.

Paul gives us a great example of how to respectfully address controversial matters with our Christian family. As we go through this book, we will see different tactics and methods that we would be wise to adopt.

## **SEVEN POINTS OF ADVICE REGARDING HOW TO TALK TO OUR CHRISTIAN FAMILY ABOUT CONTROVERSIAL MATTERS:**

### **1.) Offer meaningful compliments (4-7):**

- What Paul does:
  - Before Paul even mentions the issue at hand, he offers genuine words of praise and encouragement regarding what he has heard about Philemon.
  - Compliments Paul gives to Philemon:
    - i. He has love and faith toward Jesus and the church.
    - ii. He refreshes the hearts of the saints with his love.
- Why Paul does it:
  - Paul compliments Philemon to start the conversation with amiable intentions.
  - This introduction will make known that the message is not hostile, thus disarming Philemon.
  - Compliment or flattery? What's the difference?
    - i. Flattery: excessive and insincere praise
    - ii. We would flatter someone for selfish purposes.
    - iii. We compliment for Godly purposes.
- Application:
  - If we are bringing an issue or request to our respected brother, we owe it to them to acknowledge some of the positive things that they are doing.
  - This is especially important for new Christians. They feel insecure and ignorant, but are trying very hard to conform to this new lifestyle. We can easily discourage them if we

constantly tell them what they need to be doing without reinforcing the good that they have done.

- Nothing is more discouraging than all our efforts seeming insufficient. Even if our brother needs to improve something, let us first show that we acknowledge all his efforts in other areas. This will make our brother much more likely to positively receive our message.

## **2.) Ask before telling (8-11):**

- What Paul does:
  - Paul explains that he has the authority to command, but rather, makes an appeal instead.
  - What gives Paul the authority to command?
    - i. He is an apostle. He has the spirit.
  - Yet, he doesn't throw his weight around.
- Why Paul does it:
  - Paul claimed to have respect for Philemon. Asking before telling is a display of that respect.
  - Just because Paul has authority doesn't give him permission to tactlessly exploit it.
  - Do we have similar authority?
    - i. Though we aren't apostles, we do have their inspired words, granting us an equal authority. The apostles were simply revealing God's commands. We do the same when we teach from the Bible.
- Application:
  - Can we senselessly command people just because we are right? The Apostle Paul didn't.
  - A demand suggests an assumption of expected disobedience.
    - i. People are offended by this assumption.
    - ii. How often do we feel that we could take orders easier if people would ask nicely?
  - This mistake is usually made in accidental moments of insensitivity.
  - We need to be thoughtful enough to ask before we tell.

## **3.) Have willingness to sacrifice/ compromise (12-14):**

- What Paul does:
  - Paul expresses that he desires to keep Onesimus for his own spiritual purposes, but knows that he is obligated to send him back to Philemon.
  - Paul is revealing what he would most like to do, but manifesting his willingness to sacrifice/ compromise.
- Why Paul does this:
  - Philemon will be more willing to sacrifice/ compromise when he sees Paul doing the same.
  - Philemon will be tempted to act selfishly by punishing the unfaithful servant, but Paul's sacrificial behavior will inspire Philemon to do the same.
- Application:
  - If we are requesting a brother to make a self-sacrificial decision, we need to look for opportunity to show him that we are willing to do the same.
  - This will inspire him to behave similarly.
  - Your good example will make the right decision an obvious choice for your brother. He will be hard pressed to be selfish if you are behaving very selflessly.

## **4.) Provide a reasonable argument (15-16):**

- What Paul does:
  - Paul knows that Onesimus has wronged Philemon. To help Philemon, Paul provides a reasonable argument to coax him into forgiveness.

- Paul reasons that Onesimus' infidelity could be justified by God providentially leading him to salvation.
- Why Paul does this:
  - Paul provides this argument to give Philemon a good reason to do the right thing. Philemon might need a little help dissolving his grudge. Paul's argument will help Philemon forgive and forget.
  - How easily could Philemon stay angry knowing that Onesimus' sin led him to salvation?
  - Philemon, being a strong Christian, knows that Onesimus' salvation is more valuable than justice for his wrong deeds.
- Application:
  - If we expect our brothers to make a change, we need to have a reasonable argument to help convince them.
  - This challenges us to have good reasons for our request. Have we expected somebody to make a change without any good reason except our own personal opinion?
  - If we expect someone to do something sacrificial, we need to ensure that we have a reasonable argument to back up our words.

#### **5.) Take personal responsibility in the matter (17-20):**

- What Paul does:
  - Paul agrees to pay back whatever Onesimus owes Philemon.
- Why Paul does this:
  - Paul opting to pay Onesimus' bill is clearly an act of compromise/ sacrifice, but it is more than that as well.
  - Paul knows the Philemon's forgiveness won't come easily. Instead of simply commanding and waiting for Philemon's response, Paul chooses to take personal responsibility to help Philemon forgive.
  - The financial damage would be difficult to forget about. How much easier would it be to forgive Onesimus if the financial loss were out of the picture?
- Application:
  - If we expect someone to make a difficult decision, we need to be willing to do more than just tell him or her what to do. We need to be prepared to self-sacrifice to make the right decision easier.
  - It is necessary to give up time, money, and attention to help someone flee alcoholism, potential adultery, lying, etc...

#### **6.) Live a giving life (19):**

- What Paul does:
  - Paul briefly mentions that Philemon owes him.
  - Evidently Paul had already helped Philemon in some way. Now Paul is cashing in that favor.
  - This tactic isn't about what Paul is doing in this letter. It is about what Paul has been doing with his relationship with Philemon in the past. Paul has been willing to help Philemon before.
- Why Paul does this:
  - Paul doesn't do favors just to get what he wants, but Paul is willing to give to others knowing that it will only help his positive influence over others in such cases like this.
  - Philemon will find it easier to heed Paul's request because Paul has been brotherly to Philemon in the past.

- Application:
    - Can we expect others to do what we request if we've never done anything for them?
    - We shouldn't help each other for selfish motives, but we need to have strong giving relationships with our Christian family so they will be willing to heed our request.
- 7.) Expect the best from your brother (21):**
- What Paul does:
    - Paul confesses his confidence that Philemon will exceed his expectations. This is an indirect compliment to Philemon's submissive Christian character.
  - Why Paul does this:
    - Paul respects Philemon. This is another way in which Paul shows his respect.
    - Paul would be insulting Philemon's character by presuming his disobedience. This would make Philemon less willing to obey.
    - Instead Paul expects Philemon's obedience to hearten him.
  - Application:
    - We are less likely to obey those whom speak down to us. We react to this offense by disregarding their words.
    - Our brother will be offended if we act as though we doubt his ability to do the right thing.
    - Clearly doing so will inhibit our ability to convince our brother of his needed change.
    - We need to treat our brother with respect and expect the best from him. This will only make him more willing.

**8.) Be a friend (22-25).**

- What Paul does:
  - After Paul advises Philemon, he goes on to state his intent to stay with him soon.
- Why Paul does this:
  - Philemon is a friend to Paul. This friendship doesn't change because of this controversial issue.
- Application:
  - We need to be friends with all our Christian family. When we talk to our brother about something controversial, it needs to be a conversation between friends. We are less likely to accept advice from enemies.
  - When there are issues among our Christian family, we need to deal with them, but also anticipate the continuation of our friendship.
    - i. I've seen many brethren challenge their brothers excited to point out their wrong. Being friends, these issues should sadden us more than excite us. If we are excited to point out the error of our brother, we do not love him as a friend, and do not intend to be his friend.
    - ii. We can't come to our brethren with spiritual instruction behaving as enemies. We need to come with spiritual concern as friends.
    - iii. If our brother sees that we are speaking with concern and respect, the friendship will be able to endure.

**CONCLUSION:**

**Blessed are the peacemakers (Mat 5:9):** Jesus expects us to be peaceful, even among times of controversy. This is a challenging thing, but Paul has given an excellent guide of how to do so. Even though this book only consists of examples (rather than commands), I believe we will be found guilty for tactlessly arguing with our brothers and sisters if we continue to do so. Love your Christian family enough to talk to them if they are in error, but love them even more by doing it with respect. Take the time to ensure that you are behaving thoughtfully and respectfully rather than tactlessly and insensitively.