

Preaching From Philemon

Initial Considerations

1. Philemon and the church:
 - a. It is a very neglected portion of Scripture.
 - b. No distinctive theological or ethical teachings
 - c. Close connection with the Colossian letter
 - d. It deals with an embarrassing issue for the 21st century PC church.
 - e. Yet, it is a masterpiece of Christian motivation and a pattern for dealing with conflict within the church – something that *every* generation will face.

2. General situation: The Colossian church had been established during Paul's three years in Ephesus on his third missionary journey (A.D. 53-55). One of the wealthier members, Philemon, had formed a close relationship with Paul, perhaps in Ephesus. After Paul's return to Jerusalem, he served two years of imprisonment in Caesarea before being sent to Rome for his appeal to Caesar. While in Rome, he was visited by one of Philemon's slaves, a man named Onesimus. He had either run away from his master (traditional view) or had sought out his master's good friend to serve as a mediator or *amicus domini* (a view espoused by Joseph Fitzmyer today) between him and his master. Either way, there was conflict between Philemon and Onesimus which meant that there was a critical conflict within the body of the Colossian church. Eventually, Paul sent Onesimus back to Colossae to make things right with Philemon. Accompanied by Tychicus and carrying the Letter to the Colossians and the Letter to Philemon, Onesimus embarked on the high-risk mission to face Philemon. The very public/private letter to Philemon was probably first experienced within the house church that met in Philemon's home.

Sermon Starters

1. ***Two Letters Came Today*** – trying to imagine what it would have been like to have been in the Colossian church when Onesimus returned with the letter to Philemon

2. ***It's Not Just About You!*** – The letter is addressed to Philemon, Apphia, Archippus *and to the church that meets in your home*. Christianity, while involving a personal faith, was never intended to be a *private* religion.

3. ***Sharing Your Faith*** (6) – We typically use this language to describe evangelism. In this context, it has more to do with sharing faith *within* the church. It is in working through the inevitable relationship issues in any congregation that a Christian gains “a full understanding of every good thing we have in Christ.”

4. ***Difficult People*** (6) – Ever wonder why God doesn't put all the especially difficult people into the same congregation, allowing everyone else to be a lot happier and more productive? Difficult people and difficult situations actually serve a very important function within the church; they provide the raw material for growing in patience, forgiveness, and love. There is an old Indian story of a peaceful tribe of people who lived on the banks of a river. One day a warring tribe headed their way, leaving the peaceful tribe with no way of escape. They had long known that not even their strongest braves could cross the swift river without being swept away. However, on that day they had no choice. So the braves put the oldest and the youngest on their shoulders and headed into the river. Much to their surprise, they were not swept away that day. The weight of those they carried helped to keep their feet firmly planted on the river bed. That day they all learned just how much they needed each other.
5. ***Don't You Like Anything About Us?*** (7) – There is a lot of personal affirmation for Philemon in this letter. A preacher friend of mine told me of something that was said to him along this line many years ago. He was preaching for a country congregation and one night, following the evening service, he was driving out of the parking lot and heading home. A lady in the congregation waved him down as he was leaving. She walked over to his car and, with tears in her eyes, asked, "Don't you like anything about us?" It wasn't until then that he realized that his preaching had been virtually devoid of affirmation.
6. ***Of Your Own Free Will*** (14) – There was a modern parable that was often used in sermons during my youth. It was the story of a young woman who married and hoped to live "happily ever after." Instead, she was presented by her new husband with a list in which he detailed the many, many demands he had for her. The marriage was cold, loveless, and oppressive. Years later, the man died, and in the course of time she remarried. The second marriage was all that the first relationship had not been. This husband was warm, encouraging, affirming, and sacrificial. One day the woman was up in the attic looking for something when she saw, among her old belongings, the horrible list that had so long tormented her. As she wept, an amazing fact dawned on her; she was doing all of the same things on the list for her second husband – and loving every minute of it! The first time she had done those things feeling like a slave. This time it was of her own free will!
7. ***Accept Him as You Would Me*** (17) – Tolstoy's story *Where Love Is, God Is*. Story of Martin Avdeich, a shoemaker who waited all day for Jesus
8. ***The Power of Believing In Someone*** (21) – Don Quixote, in *Man of La Mancha*, sees a coarse barmaid named Aldonza as the bright and shining Dulcinea. In the end, she comes to see herself in the same way.