

Paul's Letter to Philemon

(Part Two -- Thanksgiving)

After his salutation, which we studied carefully last week, Paul goes on to offer a prayer on behalf of Philemon:

I thank my God always, making mention of you in my prayers, because I hear of your love and of the faith which you have toward the Lord Jesus and toward all the saints; and I pray that the fellowship of your faith may become effective through the knowledge of every good thing which is in you for Christ's sake (4-6). Eventually, we will learn that Paul converted Philemon (assuming that's the correct interpretation of verse 19). With that in mind, we more quickly might expect to hear Philemon expressing thanks for Paul (or Paul demanding it); but here, Paul expresses thanks for Philemon!

There are some important and interesting things to notice about this prayer of thanksgiving, if we look closely enough.

Paul Didn't Thank Philemon; He Thanked God for Philemon

I have often written thank you notes to various people, with such statements as "thank you for being such a good Christian" and "thank you for helping out during VBS" and "thank you for providing a place for the teens."

Here's a subtle difference: Paul didn't thank Philemon for his good deeds. Instead, he thanked God for Philemon's good deeds!

While Philemon deserves praise, he has nothing to boast about; his good work is simply the necessary outworking of his faith in Jesus. It is God who is at work in him (Phil. 1:6). "No man may boast before God" (1 Cor. 1:29). Likewise, when we prove in the present moment to be faithful or helpful, when the preacher gives a good sermon and someone responds to the gospel, when a backslider returns to the fold, it is God who deserves all the glory. We are merely "servants through whom you believed, even as the Lord gave opportunity to each one" (1 Cor. 3:5). The master "does not thank the slave because he did the things which were commanded, does he? So you too, when you do all the things which are commanded you, say, 'We are unworthy slaves; we have done only that which we ought to have done'" (Luke 17:9-10).

Let us never fail to build up our brethren with well-deserved praise (Prov. 31:28), but let's also

give credit where credit is really due, to the God who is at work in His church, who gives to His servants the strength, wisdom, and opportunity to work!

Love of God Must Precede Love of Others

Paul said of Philemon, "I hear of the love and faith which you have toward the Lord Jesus..." before he said "...and toward all the saints."

Always, our duties toward the Lord must precede our duties toward other people, whether saints or sinners. If we do not keep this in the proper order, we will never remain diligent. There will be many reasons to get bored with our brethren, to become frustrated with the wayward, and to lose sight of the value of every single eternal soul. Only those who love God first and foremost will sacrifice personal comfort for the privilege of loving others.

This reminds us of Paul's praise of the Macedonian Christians, who were "begging us with much urging for the favor of participation in the support of the saints, and this, not as we had expected; but they first gave themselves to the Lord, and to us by the will of God" (2 Cor. 8:4-5). Give yourself to the Lord, and you will see your responsibilities toward other people in a new light.

Love and Faith are Actions

How did Paul know that Philemon was a faithful, helpful person? Paul said, "I hear of your love and faith ... toward all the saints." These sentiments were evidenced by his public actions. Paul caught wind of them because they were well known to all. "What use is it, my brethren, if a man says he has faith, but he has no works?...I will show you my faith by my works" (James 2:14, 18).

Love and Faith Must Be Guided by Knowledge

Paul also declared that Philemon's love and faith become "effective through the knowledge of every good thing which is in you for Christ's sake." The word "become effective" is energies, and even though Paul had never seen artificial lighting, it is certainly tempting for us to associate this with the modern concept "become energized." Without knowledge driving and directing our faith, we are like a lamp that has not been plugged in, like a trolley car that has slipped off the rail.

This is the same progression found in the prayers that Paul offers at the beginning of all of his

prison epistles (Eph. 1:17, Phil. 1:9, Col. 1:9). Christian life begins with faith, is deepened by love, and is effective only when guided by knowledge. Without love of God and man, faith is pointless (1 Cor. 13:1-3); but without knowledge of God's word, faith blunders vainly (Rom. 10:2). We are liable to lead people astray when we act without consulting the Bible, no matter how sincerely or fervently we act.

We must strive to let others—both inside and outside of the body of Christ—see Christ living in us, always in accordance with His word.

A Powerful Statement

Finally, Paul says something which is, to my mind, one of the most touching statements of Scripture:

For I have come to have much joy and comfort in your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you, brother (7). The word “refresh,” *anapauo*, is originally “a military metaphor, signifying the rest that an army takes while on the march ... the rest needed to regain strength for renewed warfare” (N. T Wright).

We have all been the recipient, from time to time, of a kind note, a thoughtful gift, a cheerful visit, an uplifting comment, a reference to the right passage of Scripture, which brought encouragement to our lives in a difficult season. There have been certain individuals in the church who, even from a distance, through example and deeds, served as shining lights to the saints in dark times. These people refresh the hearts of the saints. Without them, our faith would have suffered shipwreck many times over. We thank God for them!

Paul wasn't afraid to write a thank you note to his fellow laborers. Perhaps because many of Paul's letters were, of necessity, full of admonition and correction, Paul relished the opportunity to accentuate something positive. In any case, we see here on display Proverbs 16:21, “Sweetness of speech increases persuasiveness.” By the end of the letter, Paul will ask Philemon to refresh his spirit once again (v. 20). Paul was by no means flattering or buttering up Philemon—every word was true. But Paul praised Philemon before getting into the serious issue at hand, which had the potential to separate these friends or threaten the work of the church in Colossae. We will investigate issue that next week. —John Guzzetta