



Central Peninsula Church

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Calling on Family Support

SERIES: *Restoring Relationships God's Way*

A mother entered her daughter's bedroom one afternoon and saw a letter on the bed. With trembling hands, she read:

Dear Mom,

It is with much regret and sorrow that I'm telling you that I've run away with my new boyfriend. I know how upset you'll be but I'm truly happy. So please find it in your heart to be happy for me. I have found real passion with Ahmed. He is so nice, with all his piercings and tattoos; his big motorcycle. But that's not all, mom, I'm pregnant! Can you believe it? Ahmed says we'll be really happy in his trailer in the woods. He wants to have more children and that's always been one of my dreams. I've learned that marijuana doesn't hurt anyone. So we've decided to sell it to help support ourselves and our children. In the meantime, please pray for the medical profession to find a cure for HIV. I pray every night for Ahmed to get better; he deserves it. Don't worry mom, I'm 15 years old now and know how to take care of myself. Someday I'll return so you and Dad can get to know your grandchildren.

Your daughter,
Judith

PS: Mom, it's not true. I'm over at Sarah's house. I just wanted to show you that there are worse things in life than the report card that's in my desk's drawer.

For most of us this would be a pretty unlikely scenario, unless you happened to live in San Francisco or L.A. But the question I want us to consider is – what if it were true? What if your 15 year old daughter did get pregnant and ran off with her boyfriend? And for three, or maybe five, years you never received even a letter – not one peep – until one morning she unexpectedly showed up at your doorstep. How would you respond? Or to change the specific, what if one of your most trusted workers embezzled \$20,000 from a business account and fled to the Cayman Islands, only to return a few weeks later with empty pockets, a forlorn look on his face, to ask for your forgiveness. Would you be hurt? Absolutely! But how would you deal with the betrayal? How are any of us able to look past the wrongs done to us and accept the wrongdoer as Christ accepts us? Well, these are some of the questions we'll be mulling over

the next three weeks as we study Philemon together. Of the 13 letters Paul wrote in the New Testament, Philemon is the shortest, only 25 verses. So it's probably more like a postcard than a letter. And though short in size, it is long on truth. Between the lines of this letter of forgiveness is a message for all of us. A message about second chances and showing mercy. A message about equality in Christ and the power of the gospel to transcend social boundaries. A message about grace. In Paul's words we don't meet an apostle who is armed for warfare, sheathed in logic, or bristling with arguments, as he is so often pictured. Instead we see one who makes no demands, who bends over backwards to help those he loves make God honoring decisions for their lives. We don't see him as a preacher or theologian, but simply as one man writing to a friend in the interest of another friend.

Philemon was one of Paul's converts who lived in Colossae. And in 62 A.D., a crime occurred in his household. This particular crime would, most likely, have remained unresolved and historically unknown, except that the fugitive fled to Rome, where he crossed paths with the apostle Paul. Paul was in Rome at the time, under house arrest and awaiting trial before Caesar. Although in chains, he was still able to preach the gospel to those who came to him, including this fugitive named Onesimus. Onesimus was one of sixty million slaves who shouldered the weight of the Roman Empire in those days. And though slavery has never been something to envy, in Rome it was particularly brutal. As William Barclay describes: "All the work of Rome was done by slaves and by no means only menial tasks; doctors, teachers, musicians, actors, secretaries, stewards were slaves. The Roman attitude was that there was no point in being master of the world and doing one's own work. Let the slaves do that and let the citizens live in pampered idleness. The supply of slaves would never run out. But it would be wrong to think that the lot of slaves was always wretched and unhappy, and that they were always treated with cruelty. Many slaves were loved and trusted members of the family; but one great inescapable fact dominated the whole situation. In Roman law a slave was not a person but a thing; and he had absolutely no legal rights whatsoever. For that reason there could be no such thing as justice where

slaves were concerned. A master had absolute power over them. He could punish them with blows of the rod, the lash, or the knot; he could brand them upon the forehead if they were thieves or runaways, or, in the end, if they proved irreclaimable, he could crucify them.”

Before Onesimus fled, he most likely stole something from his master, Philemon, possibly to finance his flight. So not only was he a fugitive but a thief as well – a candidate for branding, or worse, if he were ever caught and returned. Freedom would not have felt very free with concerns like that restricting his every move. In my previous life, before the Lord rescued me from a life of crime, I can remember how that felt. There is nothing as oppressive as running from the wrongs we’ve done. There are no fox holes deep enough. No amount of drugs strong enough to salve the sense of guilt that results. But fortunately for Onesimus (and for me), God had a freedom waiting that was beyond anything he could have dreamt possible. Through his contact with Paul, Onesimus was introduced to the Savior. And when he reached out in faith, the shackles of fear and shame came tumbling to the ground. In Christ, he found forgiveness. But freedom in Christ doesn’t absolve our earthly debts and responsibilities, does it. And Paul knew that, although Onesimus’ slate had been wiped clean before God, he also needed to make things right with Philemon. So with these issues on the table, Paul sat down and wrote this letter for Onesimus, himself, to hand deliver to Philemon, his former master. So as we take a look at this little gem over the next couple of weeks I want us to pay attention to how Paul seeks to resolve this conflict God’s way. Maybe there are some lessons we can learn through his example. Turn with me to Paul’s letter to Philemon.

“Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, To Philemon our beloved brother and fellow worker, and to Apphia our sister, and to Archippus our fellow soldier, and to the church in your house: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. 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. 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” (Philemon

1–7).

In the midst of relational conflict it’s always helpful to call upon family support. As Christians, our healing and growth takes place in, and not excluded from, the body of Christ. So in Paul’s introductory remarks he imparts this truth by first affirming the community in Philemon’s household. In a sense, he begins to till the soil around Philemon’s heart by appealing to three qualities that provide a Christ centered foundation for resolving conflict.

A. Appeal to Family Unity

Paul’s first appeal is to family unity. He opens his letter with this greeting, **“Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, to Philemon our beloved and fellow worker, and to Apphia our sister, and to Archippus our fellow soldier, and to the church in your house: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ”** (vv. 1-3). Paul comes to Philemon in humility, as Christ’s prisoner. He drops all reference to his status as an apostle. And by referring to himself as “a prisoner of Christ Jesus,” allows his chains to do the speaking for him. He may simply want to inform Philemon of his circumstances. Or he may be wanting to massage Philemon’s heart – the image of a captive pleading for a slave would certainly have an affect. But there may also be something deeper in Paul’s reference here. Paul is seeing beyond his manacled wrists to a higher authority; One who has allowed him to be where he is. He is Christ’s prisoner, not Caesar’s, according to God’s sovereign will. Paul understood that the hand of God moves every piece on the board and that his current circumstances, no matter how restricting, had divine purpose.

Now this speaks of the enormous cost involved in our commitments to Christ. Jesus never promised us exemption from heartache and pain if we simply muster up enough faith. Biblical faith is tough. It demands a constant commitment to hang on and trust God against all odds, to keep believing in Christ’s sovereignty despite all evidence to the contrary; to continue pressing into His love so our hearts don’t become jaded by circumstance; to forgive and keep forgiving whenever we’ve been insulted, ripped off or injured by another. Regardless of how we may think about this, we are not unique in our experience. Paul was acquainted with heartache as well. And yet he accepted them as part and parcel of his commission to Christ that the messenger would indeed suffer for his master. In the words of the apostle Peter, “For you have been called for this

purpose, since Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example for you to follow.” It’s one thing to suffer because we deserve it. It’s quite another to suffer without apparent cause. Yet Christ’s path was one of unjust suffering. And in our identification with Him we are called to follow in His steps. Jesus refused to make threats. He never countered a wrong with more wrong but entrusted Himself to God completely. So as a prisoner, Paul is pointing to what is true of every Christian – we are bound, we have been captured and taken hostage by the sovereign will of God in Christ Jesus.

For this reason Paul and Timothy devoted their entire lives to Christ. And so had Philemon, whose home housed the church in Colossae. By referring to Philemon as “our beloved brother and fellow worker” Paul is pointing to the underlying foundation of their relationship together. It is one of mutual love and service for the sake of Christ. In his large-hearted way, Paul empties himself of any rank or status and lifts Philemon’s service by uniting it with his own. They are equal brothers and fellow workers for the same Lord. He then goes on to include Apphia “our sister,” and Archippus “our fellow soldier” in his greeting. Most assume that Apphia was the wife of Philemon. As mistress of the household she would be the one most concerned with domestic duties. So it’s only right that Paul would include her in any discussion about the return of a runaway slave. And Archippus is probably her son. Finally, the greeting comes “to the church in your house.” This means that the letter is not exclusively for Philemon’s eyes; the entire church is also included in the appeal.

So why does Paul address the whole church with what seems to be a private affair? One could argue that by doing so Paul is subtly putting pressure on Philemon to comply with his request. But I think Paul is emphasizing how individual decisions ultimately affect the entire believing community. The healthiest way for anyone to make a tough ethical decision is within the context of community support. And by addressing a “private” letter to the entire church, Paul is implying that the church has some say in the decisions believers may consider theirs alone. One can easily see how this would affect our culture today. We live in a society that demands its rights to privacy above everything else. “Who are they to tell me what to do or how to behave” is the response we would normally hear. Most wouldn’t appreciate the church being privy to a personal matter concerning how an unfaithful worker should be treated, or a runaway daughter disciplined, or an alcoholic husband corrected. They would see it as an invasion of privacy. But Paul approached things differently. He assumed that Christians live and act within the context of community. That we are caught in an inescapable network of

mutuality. And that whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. For when we are joined in Christ, we are joined to one another.

So in many ways, the church was meant to function as an extended family, one where trust and respect govern the community; where no secrets are hidden from sight. Sadly, many have lost this sense of true community. They see little connection between the business they conduct in the privacy of their homes and their affiliation to a spiritual household. They often insist on their rights to manage their own lives without any thought to how it may affect others.

Paul, however, saw the church as something more, and in this letter shows how two households, the natural and the spiritual intersect. He saw that the spiritual health of the community will always be demonstrated by the well-being of its social relationships. And so we have this beautiful picture of Philemon and Apphia managing their home as to the Lord, to be ruled by Him and used for Him, with all family ties and tasks considered sacred. And since the house church meets in the same home, Paul naturally expects that Philemon will consider how his decisions will impact the community of faith. Though Philemon has sole legal jurisdiction over his slaves, Paul assumes that the whole church, and not just his master, should have a voice in whether or not they will accept Onesimus back as their own. Granted, his crime showed disloyalty. It violated the welfare of the household in which he lived and probably cost Philemon much sorrow. But Onesimus is also in need of their forgiveness, their guidance and community support. In this context, Paul’s blessing in verse 3, “Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ,” are not meaningless or unpractical words. They must remind Philemon of what he has already experienced of God’s blessings. And now he is being called upon to extend the same to a slave who has wronged him. And if he does, he will know more fully the peace of God that has, at its source, the sacrificial work and grace of the Lord Jesus Christ.

B. Appeal to Family Love

Secondly, Paul appeals to family love. In verses 4-5 he writes, **“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”** In the confines of his jail cell, Paul must have had lots of time to pray and give thanks. Solitude has a way of doing that. It minimizes the distractions and

allows those things of real value to float to the surface of our awareness. But Paul did more than pray. He also had his ears bent towards the believing community which often brought new occasion for his prayers and thanksgiving. Epaphras, who pastored the church in Colossae, was now with Paul in his imprisonment. And from him Paul would have heard news concerning Philemon's great hospitality and generosity. Then there was Onesimus, the fugitive slave, from whom Paul would have learned more of Philemon's character and breadth of ministry. And at every mention of Philemon's name, Paul would lift his heart in gratitude for a life so affected by the saving influences of grace.

But notice to whom Paul offers thanks. So acquainted was he of God's grace and mercy; so related was he to the One who totally identifies with our sufferings that he doesn't hesitate to use the personal pronoun " *my* God." As the ancient psalmist prayed, "The Lord is *my* rock, *my* fortress, and *my* salvation." So Paul's personal identity was anchored to the outstretched arms of God's love. And he was grateful; thankful for the very life which flowed through his veins and the evidence of such in Philemon's life. And so Paul affirms Philemon. He tells him, "I am so grateful for you. Whenever I think of you I thank *my* God." What great words of encouragement! Isn't this what we need, to be affirmed in this way?

You know, words are an incredibly powerful tool. What we say and how we say it can make the difference between drawing closer to the hearts of others or hurting them with insensitive remarks. I thought about the impact of words when I read a story by Hilary Clinton, whose father never affirmed her as a child. When she was in high school she brought home a report card with an A in every subject. She proudly showed it to her father, hoping for approval or praise. Instead he said, "You must be attending an easy school." Thirty-five years later, that thoughtless remark is still etched in Mrs. Clinton's mind. Her father may have considered it a casual joke, but it created a point of pain for his daughter that has endured to this day. Words are a mighty instrument with lasting power to enlighten, encourage, and heal; or when used carelessly, to wound and destroy. Like Paul, I pray we would choose words that build others up and bring glory to God. It is so encouraging to hear other's say, "Hey, I'm so thankful for you." Do you make it a daily priority to show gratitude to those you love? Does your family, your coworkers or associates know they are appreciated? Now, some folks get a little confused here because they think it's impossible to express gratitude unless they feel thankful. And that's simply not true. Gratitude is more about choice than feeling. We can choose to be grateful even when our emotions are steeped with hurt and resentment. We can choose to listen to the voices that forgive and look upon faces that smile, even when we, like the apostle Paul, are

alienated from those we love. The option is always open to view our lives through thankful eyes.

So Paul serves as a great model here. Much of our relational conflicts would be minimized if we were more intentional about affirming one another on a daily basis. It's just that simple! Paul is not buttering Philemon up with praise before broaching the subject of Onesimus – that would be manipulative. He sincerely offers thanks because he has heard of Philemon's faith *and* the love he extends to the community, without partiality.

In Paul's eyes, Philemon was a man of great faith. Now, faith is more than mere intellectual assent to some distant "pie in the sky" god. The difference between faith as "belief in something that may or may not exist" and faith as "trusting in the God of the Scriptures" is enormous. The first is a matter of the head, the second a matter of the heart. The first can leave us unchanged; the second intrinsically brings change. You may have heard the story of the young man who fell off a cliff one day while he was hiking. On the way down he was able to grab hold of a branch. And as he hung there for dear life, he looked down to see a rocky valley some fifteen hundred feet below. When he looked up he saw he was about 20 feet from where he had fallen. So in a loud voice he yelled, "Help! Is anybody up there?" At once a voice called back, "I am here and I will save you if you believe in me." "I believe! I believe!" he cried. "Okay!" the voice answered, "if you believe in me, then let go of the branch and you will be saved." The man heard the voice, then looked back down again. Seeing the valley below, he quickly looked back up and shouted, "Is there anybody else up there?"

What this story illustrates is that faith, in and of itself, has no real value whatsoever. We can have faith in a lot of things and still remain stuck, can't we. Faith only derives its value from its object. So when Christ is the object of faith, lives are transformed from the cliffs of despair. And hearts begin to change from the inside out. Philemon possessed such a faith, one that was anchored in the person of Jesus Christ.

One of the ways that Philemon's faith proved itself was through the love he displayed towards others. Paul is talking about a family kind of love, one that brothers and sisters in Christ have towards one another. Such indiscriminate love was rare in that day, where the barriers of prejudice were far greater than they are today. But Philemon's love was not an emotional affair that evaporated when things got too hot. It was the news of his practical goodness, his generosity and hospitality that warmed Paul in his prison cell. It was a love that reached into the pockets

of its humanity for something more than a little loose change; one that cashed in on the hard coinage of good deeds. And it was a love that had, at its source, an undivided faith in the Lord Jesus. Only in true faith can love be true. As one writer eloquently puts it: "That which is exhaled from the heart and drawn upwards by the savor of Christ's self-sacrificing love is faith; when it falls to earth again like a gentle rain from heaven which causes the good seeds of compassion to sprout forth, it is love. So are faith and love wedded, and they cannot ever be divorced. They belong together; consequently a loveless faith is cruel, and a faithless love sentimental."

To emphasize love at the expense of our faith is to allow love to spill over the boundaries of truth. And when the borders of truth get washed away, those we care for are not given the benefit of seeing Christ in us. So if you have ever opened your home to abuse or neglect of any kind and have allowed it to go unchecked, then you are operating out of a codependent and faithless love, or as some writers would call it, "cheap grace."

One of the greatest challenges that confronts me in counseling is not with the person who is acting out destructively, but with the spouse or parent who continues to protect them from its consequences. True love never compromises its standards. Never rolls over in the face of sin. But rather leads us and those we care about closer to the Lord. On the other hand, to emphasize faith at the expense of love produces a cold and hardhearted legalism that, though holding to the same faith, is as empty of genuine Christian life as the former. Here is the reason the world looks upon the church with a foul taste in its mouth, referring to the community of saints as "the frozen chosen." And who can blame them – we simply cannot say we know God's love and yet withhold it from others. It's a contradiction in terms. But Philemon's love was neither codependent or heartless, but served as a wonderful example of authentic Christian goodness and hospitality in action.

C. Appeal to Family Service

As Paul reflected on Philemon's character, the Spirit of God led him into intercessory prayer for him: **"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. 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."**

Paul here is acknowledging Philemon's track record as a servant. That's the third quality he is pointing to. He is not praying for success in Philemon's evangelistic or pastoral work. Nor is he referring to witnessing to others who are not believers. Although, I

have to say, the way in which we treat one another is a very powerful witness to those outside the church. There are those who have never stepped inside a church building or read the scriptures and yet they are constantly reading us. They're watching to see whether or not our actions reflect who we say we are. It's so important that we allow our faith to shine. Many who are living in the dark and experiencing great suffering will be drawn to the Lord as a result. But it is the burden of Paul's prayer here that Philemon continues to share the same love and faith with respect to Onesimus who is in need of his forgiveness and help. He prays that the fellowship – or the sharing, the generosity – of Philemon's faith would become effective or active as he realizes the knowledge of every good thing which is in him for Christ's sake. In other words, Paul is saying, "Philemon, the moral insight is within you. I have seen your love and faith at work. And now I am praying that you would make it active in this situation."

One night just before the great Broadway musical star, Mary Martin, was to go on stage in *South Pacific*, a note was handed to her. It was from Oscar Hammerstein, who at that moment was on his deathbed. The short note simply said: "Dear Mary, a bell's not a bell till you ring it. A song's not a song till you sing it. Love in your heart is not put there to stay. Love isn't love till you give it away." To be worth anything, love must be demonstrated, not simply possessed. It has to put on "work clothes." Often we know, at least on an intellectual level, what we "ought" to do, but it means nothing until we step out and take action. But Paul has confidence in Philemon's willingness to honor Christ in his actions. And though his decision concerning Onesimus will require an extraordinary exercise of faith, love, and moral insight, he has a well seasoned track record.

Like an oasis in the desert, Philemon's service refreshed the hearts of the saints, including his slaves. Even Paul rejoiced that others, rather than he himself, were benefiting from Philemon's heart of service. None of us can see, can we, how far the blessings of kindness may travel. There is no way to anticipate when the seeds of love will bear fruit in others. When I reflect back on how those who have tithed into my spiritual account have affected me, I realize how these deposits have shaped my heart for the good. How they have changed me for eternity. I also recognize, in all humility, that one of the primary reasons I am in any way capable of caring for others is because it was first done for me. Are you caring for others heart to heart? The word Paul uses here for "heart" refers to the "seat of emotions." True

service has a heart felt quality about it. It massages and helps bring to life those innermost, and perhaps dormant, feelings of kindness, compassion, and empathy. It causes those who are weary to be free from labor and suffering for a period of time. It helps them recover their senses and collect their strength. In this Philemon demonstrated something of Christ's spirit when Jesus washed His disciples feet. After Jesus lived out servanthood before them, He called His disciples to the way of service: **"If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's. For I have given you an example, that you should do as I have done to you"** (John 13: 14-15). As the cross is the sign of submission, so the towel is the sign of service. Only sacrificial service takes us to the level of basic human need.

In his book, *A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life*, William Law urged that every day should be viewed in this way. By learning to serve one another we "condescend to all the weaknesses and infirmities of our fellow man, covering their frailties, loving their excellencies, encouraging their virtues, relieving their wants, rejoicing in their prosperity's, showing compassion for their distress, receiving their friendship, overlooking their unkindness, forgiving their malice, being a servant of servants, and condescending to do the lowest offices to the lowest of mankind." In this way true service builds true community. Quietly and unpretentiously it goes about caring for the needs of others; forever binding, ever healing, always building deeper relationships in Christ.

There is one last thing to notice in this passage. Paul ends verse 7 with the word "brother." His emotions were stirred. And yet he didn't hold them back. Paul knew how to grieve *and* to rejoice with others. In both, he allowed his entire heart to be poured out for others. But here, too, is another example of Paul's tact. As Philemon reads on, he will learn that Onesimus is also "a beloved brother," and that in sending him back Paul is sending his "very heart." Will Philemon allow that to soak in? Will he allow it to penetrate those areas of his own heart that have been wounded by Onesimus? Paul believes he will. This word "brother" then comes as a fitting climax, showing how deeply Paul loves this man and how he sees them tied to a single strand of brotherhood in Christ. Do you see relationships in this way? Is your commitment to Christ reflected in the quality of your relational ties? This is so important! For it's only when the ties that bind us together are stronger than those that would tear us apart, that we stand even a remote chance of resolving conflict in a healthy way. God created us to work out our struggles within the framework of community. It's impossible to be spiritually alive, disconnected and alone. This means there is no longer any room to think in terms of *you* as an

individual totally separate from *me*. We have been joined together in Christ in order to learn how to work together. And here is the important part – so that every individual part benefits from all the others.

So the first order of business is to *accept no substitutes when it comes to cultivating a spiritual family and healthy relationships*. That's the first thing. We all need community. Whether these connections are made through small groups, women's bible study, or over coffee is not the issue. Ultimately this is not something that can be "programmed" into our spiritual lives. We must take the initiative to seek them out.

Which brings us to the second point - *don't stop looking until you've found them*. I can assure you that others are looking just as hard as you are. And greater health will come to you and the body of Christ as soon as you find one another. Onesimus traveled over 1300 miles to find the apostle Paul locked away in a jail cell. Why? Because he was struggling like we all do. And in the struggle we long to lay our burdens down and simply *belong*. Just as we are. With those who will take us into their lives and hearts. Care about us. Encourage us. Reflect truth into our lives. So that, with their help, we can overcome the obstacles.

And finally, *because our spiritual house is built for "one another," share your gifts one to another*. It may be as simple as a heartfelt smile or sincere prayer, A kind word or a gentle touch. A sacrificial gift or a listening ear. A hot meal, if only for a day. A shelter from the storm, if only for a night. Our service to "one another" is what marks our fellowship as distinctive. And to the degree that this kind of love and mutual respect under girds our relational foundation, conflicts will be touched and begin to fade away.

Are you struggling this morning? Are you in the midst of conflicts at home or on the job that need to be flushed out in a healthy way? After the service some of us are more than willing to pray with you. That might be a good place to start. Or you can hang out in the fellowship area, have some coffee and connect with some folks. But whatever you do, don't leave here burdened. Central Peninsula Church is not the building we are sitting in. You, the family of God, are Central Peninsula Church. Make it your own!

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