



“For Love’s Sake”

Philemon 1:1-3

July 17, 2022

We are starting a new series this morning that I have titled, “For Love’s Sake.” As we get started, I want to ask this: I wonder what portions of Scripture comes to mind when we think of the great biblical passages that teach us about the nature of love; what it truly is; how God has loved us, and how He will empower us to love others.

When we think about love revealed in the pages of Scripture, which portions of Scripture comes to mind? I have a few that comes to my mind. Perhaps we think of the famous love chapter in I Corinthians Chapter 13, where we learn that love is patient and love is kind and that it does not envy or boast, and all of the other sixteen qualities of love identified in that wonderful chapter.

Or perhaps we think of the great commandment that was issued from the heart of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, when He was asked which was the greatest of all the commandments. In Matthew Chapter 22 and Verses 34-40, Jesus replied, “You shall love the Lord your God with all of your heart, soul, mind, and strength.” Then Jesus gave an additional commandment to go with it, didn’t He? Jesus said, “The second commandment is like it. You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

Or we might think about the New Commandment that Jesus gave. We read it earlier in this morning’s service. On the eve of His crucifixion, Jesus was with His disciples and He said, “A new command I give to you, that you must love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.” (John 13:34)

There are so many portions of Scripture that come to mind. Perhaps other passages entered into your thinking as I asked that question. But starting this morning, I want to awaken all of us to another portion of the New Testament that is absolutely rich with the teaching of what the love of God is and how it manifests itself in the hearts of His people by the power of the Holy Spirit.

This comes to us from a relatively short, brief book in the Bible. It is only one chapter long. This is the briefest letter of the Apostle Paul included in the pages of the New Testament. By the way, it is the only letter of Paul’s that has been preserved in the New Testament that was not written to a church, but primarily to an individual within the church, along with a couple of people that he was related to.

If you are like me, this is not the portion of the Bible that immediately comes to mind when we think about the Scripture’s great teaching about love, because it is something of an obscure book—at least in my experience. I have not heard this portion of Scripture taught very much.

Maybe this is because it touches upon the sensitive topic of slavery in the First Century Greco-Roman world.

Yet, we have this portion of Scripture that is named after the one that it was primarily directed to first, and to the rest of us, but to him first. His name was Philemon. He was a prominent member of the Colossian church. In Paul's mind, this man, Philemon, was a mature, born again, Spirit-filled man of God. We will see this to be the case. This man, he in fact had a household bondservant, a slave, in his home by the name of Onesimus.

It is evident that Onesimus stole from Philemon and he made a run for it all the way to Rome, where he was born again and came to know Jesus Christ. As Paul dealt with this touchy situation, where he pursued reconciliation of these two brothers in Christ, his letter yields what is, in my humble opinion, some of the richest teaching about Christian love found in the pages of Scripture. And I know that it is all so rich, but so is this, my brothers and my sisters.

This morning I want for us to get to know the individuals involved, but we are going to start by reading the letter in its entirety. As we do, be looking for how it is teaching this rich love and affection throughout the entirety of this wonderful letter. Philemon, Chapter 1:

¹Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus and Timothy our brother, to Philemon our beloved fellow worker ²and Apphia our sister and Archippus our fellow soldier, and the church in your house:

³Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

⁴I thank my God always when I remember you in my prayers, ⁵because I hear of your love and of the faith that you have toward the Lord Jesus and for all the saints, ⁶and I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective for the full knowledge of every good thing that is in us for the sake of Christ. ⁷For I have derived much joy and comfort from your love, my brother, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you.

⁸Accordingly, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do what is required, ⁹yet for love's sake I prefer to appeal to you—I, Paul, an old man and now a prisoner also for Christ Jesus— ¹⁰I appeal to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I became in my imprisonment. ¹¹(Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful to you and to me.) ¹²I am sending him back to you, sending my very heart. ¹³I would have been glad to keep him with me, in order that he might serve me on your behalf during my imprisonment for the Gospel, ¹⁴but I preferred to do nothing without your consent in order that your goodness might not be by compulsion but of your own accord. ¹⁵For this perhaps is why he was parted from you for a while, that you might have him back forever, ¹⁶no longer as a bondservant but more than a bondservant, as a beloved brother—especially to me, but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord.

¹⁷So if you consider me your partner, receive him as you would receive me. ¹⁸If he has wronged you at all, or owes you anything, charge that to my account. ¹⁹I, Paul, write this with my own hand: I will repay it—to say nothing of your owing me even your own self. ²⁰Yes, brother, I want some benefit from you in the Lord. Refresh my heart in Christ.

²¹Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say. ²²At the same time, prepare a guest room for me, for I am hoping that through your prayers I will be graciously given to you.

²³Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends greetings to you, ²⁴and so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke, my fellow workers.

²⁵The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.

Amen! May God bless the reading and teaching of His Word to the health and maturity and the growth of Bethel Grace Baptist Church.

Here we have this wonderful letter from Paul to Philemon. As you can see, Paul was serving as a mediator between Philemon and Onesimus. This book has been recognized as Paul's masterpiece in persuasion. That is what Dr. Clint Arnold called it in the notes of the ESV Study Bible. I so appreciated that language, because it is there.

This letter is filled with tact and diplomacy. It is delicate at some points and yet we see that Paul was very assertive at other points. Paul was seeking to persuade Philemon, who was his friend and his brother in Christ.

What we see is that Paul was doing everything that he could to hold back the use of the divine apostolic imperative. He did everything he could to withhold himself from commanding Philemon in what he was supposed to do. Paul even said so in Verses 8 through 10,

⁸Accordingly, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do what is required, ⁹yet for love's sake I prefer to appeal to you—I, Paul, an old man and now a prisoner also for Christ Jesus—¹⁰I appeal to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I became in my imprisonment.

We can understand these verses to be the core, crucial fountainhead verses of this wonderful small letter that we have just read. Paul was saying here, “Look, Philemon, I can command you to do what you are supposed to—what you need to do. Paul even used the language here of what Philemon was *required* to do.

Paul was saying that he was bold enough to command him. That was Paul's way of saying, “Look, brother, I have got the guts to lay down the law and tell you exactly what you need to do with this young beloved brother, Onesimus. But I am not going to tell you to do it.”

Instead Paul said, “I am appealing to you for the sake of love to do what you know you are supposed to do. Don’t take Onesimus back as a bondservant. You receive him as your brother in the Lord, who you are going to know for ever and ever in the Kingdom of God. How are you going to relate to this man in eternity? That’s how you relate to him beginning right now.”

There is something in me and perhaps there is something in you too where we think that Paul should have just laid it down. Set the captives free! Paul should have said, “Slavery is disgraceful and you are not allowed to own another human being. Let Onesimus go!”

I am going to make the case throughout this study that that is exactly what Paul was getting at. But that is not how he approached it here. Here in the book of Philemon, the Spirit-filled apostle was dealing with the issue of slavery in the church and he did not want the issue of slavery in the church dealt with according to Law, but according to grace. That’s what was happening here.

Paul was saying, “Look, I have the ability to lay down authoritative divine law from the heart of the Messiah. I could tell you what to do, but I don’t want you to set this man free and to treat him like a brother because you are forced to. I want you to love him. I want you to treat him in this way, because your heart sees him this light. You are not going to demean this man, but you are going to love him as your dear brother in Christ. You are going to love him in the same way that Jesus has loved you.”

Paul wanted this from Philemon not because he was required to, but by the operation of the Spirit of God. He wanted to give way to love instead of forcing through law. That is how God has desired slavery to be dealt with in the church, not merely according to law, although the Law is good. However, slavery ought to be abolished everywhere. This was a human being. We don’t treat human beings as property, but with love. This is how Paul was appealing to Philemon throughout this whole text.

A pastor named Thabiti Anyabwile, put it like this, “Boldness would seem the more aggressive approach, befitting the tragedy of human bondage. But the apostle reaches for a longer, sharper dagger: love. Love becomes the basis of Paul’s appeal to release Onesimus.

For love’s sake, I am appealing to you in the power of the Holy Spirit to do what the Spirit of Jesus is going to call you to do. You are to love him with the same kind of love in which Christ has loved you. Christ went to the cross and He shed His blood to purchase you from slavery and to set you free. Now I appeal to you on the basis of love to deal with this man in the same way.

Philemon was raised in an environment where slavery was the status quo. It was everywhere. It pervaded the context of First Century Rome, and Paul challenged him on this. We are not dealing with that, but Paul was dealing with a relational complexity here. And Paul was trusting that the Holy Spirit was going to cut through that complexity with all the smoothness of hot knife through butter.

What relational complexities are you dealing with, especially in the church? Where is there something complicated between you and somebody else in this church or the church at large?

There is a situation where it is tense. You know you are not right with that person, and they are not right with you either.

You see them walking in the hallway at Bethel Grace, saying, “Nuts, is it too late to go the other way?” Is there anywhere where there is this tension? Let’s be reminded that in the body of Christ, there is to be an atmosphere of peace. Our flesh will resist it, but there is someone who is more powerful than our fallenness, and that is the Holy Spirit. He wants to be nurturing an atmosphere of peace.

So as we are thinking through the complexity of this situation in the First Century world that Philemon and Onesimus faced and going to be healed in the power of the Holy Spirit, what situation comes to your heart and mind? Who is the Holy Spirit bringing to your thinking? You need to start praying right now, “Lord, let it be healed. Let me not hold this person in relational bondage.”

Where are you holding a grudge, whether that person knows it or not? Where are you holding them by the back of the neck, because that is what your flesh does. But the Holy Spirit wants to give way to the fountain of love, empowered by the love we have received from Jesus, by which we have been born again, and by which He wants to resurrect relationships in the body of Christ.

Be praying about that. I pray that it gets healed even today. I pray that it gets nurtured through the weeks that we will be studying this letter, because we are going to be receiving wonderful principles of healing for the body of Christ, relationally.

Even in the midst of relational complexities, this situation is like a big ball of yarn tied up in gnarly knots. You can’t untie that knot, but can Jesus untie that knot? Jeff, can Jesus untie that knot? I am preaching to you, but I am preaching to myself too. Love and peace are to be the atmosphere that the Spirit is nurturing. He is nurturing it and we need to be pursuing it with His power and help.

Let’s talk about the power of the Spirit. You might be in a situation where by God’s grace, you have peace. You are in a situation of peace now. God has helped you to deal with things. Well, there might be something around the bend, so you need to store this up and guess what? Blessed are the peacemakers. You will learn from Paul how to move in where people want to stay out. The church is to be filled with peacemakers as well.

This morning we are going to find our introduction to this family of believers, the people that are being spoken of. We are going to try and understand the complexities of what they were facing and how Paul laid out issues that would help. Let’s understand that this is literal history. These are human beings that walked the earth; that breathed the air that we breath; who are now with Jesus, alive and well in Heaven.

I want for us to lay the personal and historical groundwork for what we are going to be exploring in the weeks ahead as the Spirit of God is speaking into our church. Let’s think about some of these people that are here and what they were facing and dealing with.

This is one of the wonderful dramas of redemption; one of the wonderful situations of His workings. It is good for us to know our brothers and to see how they were being appealed to. We will start by knowing them. Verse 3:

¹Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus and Timothy our brother, to Philemon our beloved fellow worker .

Philemon was a citizen of Colossae. The book that we are reading is an addendum to the book of Colossians. It is a letter that came attached to the four chapter book that we have been studying in previous months. Philemon was most likely raised up in pagan religion. It seems that he was born again under the preaching ministry of the Apostle Paul, likely in nearby Ephesus where Paul had spent several years teaching.

We get the sense in what we read earlier that Paul knew this man and this man knew Paul. They were familiar with one another. We kind of pick up on that in the language that Paul used. At one point he said, “Look, brother, as I’m making this appeal to you, let’s not forget that you owe me your very self.”

Not that Paul was the one who caused Philemon to be born again, but he was the vessel through which the Gospel was preached. This man breathed the breath of life as Paul was preaching. So this was Paul’s way by saying, “Hey look, the Spirit of God did the work and I was the human agent. Remember that? And by the way, brother, prepare your guest room. I’m coming to visit you soon.” Everything here indicates familiarity. These men knew each other.

Philemon was not only a member of the Colossian church, but he was a Christian leader as indicated here in the text. A congregation was meeting in his home. He was a man of means. He had some wealth. What we will see next week as we study what is in Verses 4 through 7 is that he fit the profile of a man who was growing in the Lord.

Philemon was refreshing the saints. This diverse church there in Colossae, they were benefiting from the character that God was building in his life. They had been refreshed and encouraged. He was ministering, so he was a man who was filled with love. He then was going to be urged to manifest that love in this situation too. Paul was helping him to grow in the Lord.

Philemon was not the only individual that is named in this text. Verse 2:

²and Apphia our sister and Archippus our fellow soldier

Apphia and Archippus were listed here most likely because they too were very familiar with Onesimus. This would affect their lives very closely too. Apphia was most likely the wife of Philemon. This is kind of interesting because Archippus, he was mentioned in Colossians Chapter 4 and Verse 17, “Say to Archippus fulfil the ministry you have received in the Lord.”

When we studied this a few weeks back, we saw that Archippus had a significant ministry there in Colossae. Perhaps he was the point leader in the absence of Pastor Epaphras, who was visiting Paul in Rome. So what we find is that Archippus was most likely in Philemon’s

household. He was probably his son. So all of these people were very acquainted with Onesimus, and they were going to be taught how to love in relation to the young man, Onesimus.

That brings us now to Onesimus. In Verse 10, Paul said to Philemon:

¹⁰I appeal to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I became in my imprisonment.

Onesimus was the runaway slave that had come to faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. There is in fact a lot that can be pieced together about this man based on what we read here in this book. One of the things we don't know is his nationality. Roman slavery was not based on race like slavery in Antebellum America.

The Roman armies, they went out and they conquered the nations around them, and they brought in the most talented of the people. Those people were brought in as slaves in the Roman Empire. The Romans conquered all kinds of nations, but we can understand that most of the slaves in Rome probably had the same skin color of those who were their masters.

We don't know how Onesimus became a slave. He could have been a prisoner of war. He could have been born into slavery or it could have been that he sold himself into slavery. That happened a lot too, because there were few opportunities for upper mobility in First Century Rome. So indentured servanthood is what it came down to for a lot of people. They needed to make ends meet. They needed to figure out how they were going have their basic provisions met, so they would enter into service by way of slavery to people that would take ownership of them.

We don't know exactly which situation it was for Onesimus. So those are some of the things that we are not sure about, but we do know that he was occupied with domestic work. He was a household bondservant. What we do know is that many of the household bondservants were highly trained, highly trusted individuals in their households.

They were often entrusted with raising children and running businesses. We would understand that this young man, Onesimus, was an effective man, because Paul hated to send him back. He had been so useful. The name Onesimus means useful, and he had been such a help for Paul but in the end, Paul knew that the Spirit was calling him to send Onesimus back, that there might be reconciliation.

We would understand that Onesimus was a younger man. We gather that by the affectionate language that Paul used here in this text about him. In one of the verses, Paul said, "Not that he has become my son, but he has become my child. Onesimus is my very heart. My child in the faith."

That is typically not the kind of language that a man uses of another man he respects who is near the same age as he is. If the man is decades younger, it is much more understandable that he would use that language.

So Onesimus was most likely a younger man, and he was an ambitious man. This was a very bold move for him to run away the way that he ran away. This took some courage. This took some thinking. He was a fugitive under Roman law and he knew full well that if he got caught, he would get busted.

So he had to plot his escape out and when he decided to make a run for it, he did not just go to the next major metropolitan area, which would have been Ephesus. He went all the way to Rome, because he thought it would be much easier for him to be a needle in that hay stack. He went way out yonder.

With the use of little bit of modern technology, we can get a sense of what that journey would have required. Google maps! (Pastor shows overhead map.) We see that it would have been about 1,151 miles to Rome from the area of Colossae. That journey which would have been mostly on foot would have taken 261 hours. If you traveled 10 hours a day, that is about a 26 days, about a month long journey. You can just picture this young man in Colossae telling himself, "I'm getting out of this life. I'm going to go make another life for myself. I am going to Rome to make it happen."

Onesimus realized that it was going to be a very expensive road trip. He was going to have to buy food and provisions along the way. And, also, he was going to have to buy passage across multiple bodies of water. Furthermore, being a household bondservant, he would have been one who had gained the trust of Philemon.

Onesimus knew where Philemon kept the cash. He knew which items in the household had value and when the moment came, when Philemon did not see it coming, Onesimus filled his travel sack with as much as he could get out Philemon's house and he took flight and he ran like the wind, and made his way all the way to Rome where he was thinking, "Free at last. Free at last!" And Onesimus wanted to get lost, but he got found! He got found.

Somehow Onesimus, by a wonderful working of the providence of God, he came into a relationship with the Apostle Paul in Rome and he became a follower of Jesus. He was born again. Paul said as he was writing to Philemon, "He is a brother in the Lord. He has come genuinely to know Jesus Christ. He is a new creation."

The big question that comes to my mind is how in the world did Onesimus come into contact with the Apostle Paul? That is something that is worthy of a Dicken's novel! How did that happen, because understand that Paul was under arrest. I'm sure that Paul was very thankful that he was in an apartment under house arrest and not in a dark, damp, dank dungeon, but the fact remains that Paul was bound to the Praetorian guard.

Paul did not have the freedom to go and roam the streets and conduct personal evangelism on the streetcorners, or hang out at one of the parks like a bunch of people from Bethel Grace did yesterday to invite people to church. Paul did not have the freedom to do that, so how did they come into contact?

It happened in either one of two ways. It was a wonderful, providential, happenstance—emphasis on providential—by which Onesimus came into contact with one or more of Paul’s associates or some Christians in Rome. Or it is possible that Onesimus sought Paul out. That is a possibility too.

It could have been that Onesimus was out there and he ran out of money and the opportunities for employment and for a life were not what he thought they were going to be, and life was hard. He was trying to get work somewhere and people were asking him questions about where he came from and where his family was. Onesimus was getting nervous and trying to figure out how he was going to make ends meet.

Then some of the realities began to set in and Onesimus thought back about the life that he had in Colossae. Perhaps some things came to his heart and he realized that slavery was horrible and there were some harsh masters, but Philemon was not one of them. And then he heard people talking about Paul, this man who was in prison there in Rome, and he thought that maybe he would be willing help. That is a possibility.

Or it could be that Onesimus was out doing his thing. Some of the co-workers of Paul had their eyes on him. They met Onesimus and evangelized him and told him there was a man that he needed to talk so. So he came and spent some time with Paul. What would Paul do? He would share the Gospel with him.

One way or the other, the whole story came out and they had to deal with the situation and decide what would come next as Onesimus and Philemon were then united in the Lord. They had mutual acquaintances and people they knew intimately in the same relational sphere.

Epaphras showed up and would have recognized Onesimus, so they were dealing with the situation and they knew that Onesimus needed to go back to Philemon. These were all men in Christ. These were men joined together in the bond of Christ Jesus the Lord, and the situation needed to be reconciled.

So Paul, he was sending Onesimus back and he was doing so in view of two complexities. One was the requirement of Roman law. Onesimus, yes he was a new man in Christ, but at the same time, he was a fugitive. It was mandatory in the eyes of the secular authorities that Onesimus be sent back. That is the direction they were going.

Yet, understand that when slaves ran away, they needed to be disciplined severely under Roman law. This was one of the realities that slaves faced. And masters had freedom up to capital punishment to do as they saw fit. One of the issues that they faced was the issue of Roman law.

The other challenge that they faced was the issue of the dynamic of the sinful flesh. Philemon was a man redeemed. He was a man born again. He was a man dealing with the sin nature just like us. Onesimus took flight. He took some resources with him. What happens inside of you when you get robbed, if you have been robbed?

It is one thing to get robbed by somebody that you don't know, but what if it is somebody you had trusted and known personally and had made an effort to treat well. Philemon was the type of man who would have treated his household staff well.

What was it like when Onesimus and Tychicus knocked on the door and Philemon opened it and there was Onesimus with the letter from Paul in his hand? Being a man who was still dealing with the fallen flesh, there could have been some vindictiveness that built up in Philemon.

There could have been some sense within Philemon telling him that he had the ability to discipline this young man who stole his stuff. And he would have felt like he had the right according to his flesh.

So Paul wrote this letter that is filled and overflowing with divine grace; that informed Philemon that he was a man in Christ filled with the very same Spirit who caused him to be born again. Then Paul laid out all of these appeals, appealing with Philemon to treat Onesimus in accordance with the way of love. "Philemon, you are a man who has been redeemed by the way of love. So you are a man who is to operate in the power of the love by which you have been redeemed."

So this is the appeal that is given all throughout this text. Onesimus was sent back with a letter in hand. Paul was not fearing Roman law or thinking the worst of what Philemon might do, because Paul was a man who was confident that the Spirit of God was working in Philemon's life, and that Philemon and Onesimus were then going to be a living parable for the body of Christ of what grace and reconciliation looked like in a situation like that.

Paul knew how the Spirit was going to work, so Paul was telling Philemon, "I am not laying down imperatives upon you. I am calling you to be reminded of the love by which you have been redeemed. Now, this is going to be carried out in this relationship."

The interesting thing is that it is hard to recognize in this letter just what Paul's appeal was because it does not flat out say to set him free. But as we will see in the weeks ahead, everything moved in that direction. Not as a bondservant, but as your brother, receive him! This text says, "As you would receive me, that is how you are to receive him." Paul was totally redefining that relationship for them.

Paul did not want Onesimus liberated because Philemon was required by law to liberate him. Instead, Paul wanted the relationship between these two men totally transformed because the love of God was filling Philemon's heart in such a way that it would be so.

Thus it would be exemplary not only for that situation where Christians lived in a cultural context where slavery was allowed, not only for that situation where it was reshaping the way things were going to work for people who had slaves, but for the rest of us. There are relational dynamics that are at work.

What situation came to your heart and mind earlier? Is there a relational situation with another brother or sister in the church that is tweaked and out of whack? The Spirit of God is going to move His people in the way of peace. Our flesh, as we call upon the Lord for the working of His grace, it will resist letting people go and forgiving them.

However, when we say—Lord, I need You to work in my heart that I will have a heart of forgiveness in the same way that you have forgiven me—we will be those who are going to practice a spirit of forgiveness and grace and reconciliation, not because we have to but because, by the working of the Holy Spirit within us, because we want to.

So that is the paradigm that is laid out for us here in the book of Philemon.

⁸Accordingly, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do what is required, ⁹yet for love's sake I prefer to appeal to you—I, Paul, an old man and now a prisoner also for Christ Jesus—¹⁰I appeal to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I became in my imprisonment.

With this, may the Spirit lead. May He guide. May the Spirit even today put in our hearts people that we need to be made right with, and may He give us the wisdom from Scripture to carry out what He will empower us to do. May the Spirit be at work healing and giving grace, and may we follow His lead and help one another in the situations that come to heart and mind.

I hope you will read this letter and be living in this text as we will dig into it again next week. Will you join me in a word of prayer?