



“Love’s Increasing Quality”

Philemon 1:17-25

August 7, 2022

This morning we open the book of Philemon one final time in the series that we have had in this short, personal letter. Here in this short, personal letter written by Paul to his friend, we are reminded of the love of Jesus Christ for all of the people that comprise His church. From this letter we also learn how Jesus is empowering His people to love one another.

This morning I pray that we will all learn about love’s increasing quality. The nature of the love of God is to increase and to overflow and to bear fruit. And God causes His love to grow in the lives of His people as He prepares opportunities for them to grow in Christlikeness.

Sometimes we call those opportunities trials. Sometimes those trials are challenging and stretching, aren’t they? In this life, you will find that you face trials of various kinds. In a book that he wrote called “Sticky Church,” Larry Osborne said that these trials, they can fall under one of two categories.

There are “need to know” trials and there are “need to grow” trials. In a “need to know” trial, you have the need to gain more information. You need to gain deeper Bible doctrine and understanding to deal with the hard question about the deity of Christ, that the person knocking at your door is challenging you with.

It is a “need to know” trial. Maybe you will need more knowledge of biblical ethics to deal with questions about sexuality that are being discussed in your place of employment. There are various “need to know” trials, where our understanding of Scripture needs to be deepened and expanded.

You will also find trials that fall under the “need to grow” variety. In this case, you very well may have all of the information you need. You have the knowledge. You know what God is calling you to do, but it is a matter of living out what you see and understand God to be calling you to. It is a matter of applying the knowledge that you have already gained and growing in Christlike character; often doing difficult things that God is leading and calling you to do. It is a need to grow in a character kind of trial.

Here in this letter of Philemon, Paul wrote to a brother in Christ who was in one of those “need to grow” kind of trials. We know from how he is described earlier in the letter that Philemon was a loving follower of Christ already. He had learned about the love of the Lord. Now he was going to have to grow in his application of living out that love as he received back into his life and home the runaway slave, Onesimus.

Onesimus had fled the household of Philemon. He made it all the way to Rome, about 1,150 miles away. That is quite a journey and it is evident in the book that Onesimus stole from Philemon to be able to finance that journey and to live out the first chapter of his new life.

Onesimus went to Rome and he was hoping to get lost in its massive population. And instead of getting lost, you might say that he was found. He came into a true and living knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ. He also came into a close and tender relationship with the Apostle Paul, who then referred to him as his child in the faith and as his very heart.

Now Onesimus, the runaway slave/thief, was back at the doorway of Philemon, with a letter from the Apostle in hand. Paul was urging and appealing to him to receive Onesimus back into his life and into his very heart with a totally transformed relationship. Receiving him not as a slave, but as a brother in the Lord Jesus Christ. That was the appeal of this letter.

Now as Philemon was being urged, he was in a place where he was going to have to grow in his practice of love. We see Paul urging him in that direction as he appealed for the sake of love throughout this letter. So let's pick up where we left off in Verses 17, as Paul nudged Philemon in the direction that he needed to go in.

Philemon Chapter 1, starting in Verse 17:

¹⁷So if you consider me your partner, receive him as you would receive me. ¹⁸If he has wrong 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 of his Word.

Once again, here we find this man, Philemon, in a need to grow situation. Did you see the appeal that Paul made to start off what we just read? Did you see what Paul was asking him to do?

¹⁷So if you consider me your partner, receive him as you would receive me.

Just stop and consider that for a moment. How would Paul be received in the city of Colossae in the household of his friend, Philemon? Use your imagination with me for a moment. Just imagine if we understood that the Apostle Paul himself was going to come and visit Bethel Grace

Baptist Church. What kind of reception do you think he might receive here? Am I the only one who would be very tempted to roll out the red carpet? First class accommodations. The apostle that God had used so mightily, we would want him to feel so honored and welcomed, so received in a way that is consistent with the ministry that he had carried out.

I don't think it would have been that much different for Colossae, for the church gathered there. They had a profound appreciation for this pioneer into the Gentile world. Now Paul was saying to Philemon, "Onesimus who ran, taking some of your wealth in the process, I want you to receive him just like you would receive me. If you would honor me in the way that you put me up in your house, you honor him in the same way."

This is a very profound statement when you really stop and think about it. This is something that would require some growth in the heart of Philemon. This man would be stretched in showering this kind of love and honor and respect upon the young man, Onesimus. Philemon would need to grow.

Philemon was in a need to grow situation in his life, where he was going to be growing in his Christlike affection, carrying out the vision of what Paul wrote back in Ephesians, that here in the family of Christ, there is no Jew nor Greek, male nor female, slave nor free, but Christ is all and Christ is in all.

Paul wrote all of this knowing that there is a sense in which Philemon would be doing battle with the lingering sin and sense of resentment in his flesh that is so hard to let go of when you perceive that somebody has done you wrong. That is difficult.

Philemon, he would have all of the structures of Roman law feeding into that fleshy response. For there was the expectation in Roman society that Onesimus would be severely disciplined. But Paul appealed to a much higher law issued from a much greater authority. Paul appealed to the law of love, given from the heart of the Triune God Himself.

I love that this appeal is filled with grace and mercy. So this man, Philemon, would need to grow. As we see what is here, I pray that God will be stretching us to love those with whom we have relationships that are sideways, tangled up, and messy, because the Lord desires peace.

Does anybody remember the title of this series in Philemon? It is titled, "For Love's Sake." But what is interesting is that here in Verses 17 through 25, the word love is not used a single time. In the first half of the letter, the specific language of love is used repeatedly. However, it is not used in the second half. But what we have read here, it is saturated with the practice of love.

As we look at what is here, we are going to see multiple qualities of love demonstrated by the Apostle Paul. Paul displayed in what he wrote the kind of love that he was calling Philemon to, and that the Lord would have each of us growing in as well, because it is the nature of divine love to increase all throughout life and even all throughout eternity.

But now is the time where we are dealing with the trials and the impulses that would hinder our growth in love, so I want for us to take a really close look at four qualities of the kind of love that Paul put on display, not only for Philemon as he was urging him, but for all of us.

To help us grow in Christ-like love, we see? First we see:

1. The tremendous example of love (1:17-18)

We read Paul's appeal in Verses 17 and 18:

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.

Paul was putting self-sacrificial love on display as he continued in his appeal to Philemon.

We can see in what we just read is that Paul was totally falling in with Onesimus. He was telling Philemon the master, "Friend, if you could see me and Onesimus, we are fused together and joined as one. We are now a combo plate, a combo package. We come together. How you treat me is how you treat him. How you treat him, that is how you treat me."

So they were together and a package deal, and Paul was saying, "Brother, if I have gained any favor in your eyes, I want you to bestow that favor upon my heart, upon my son, Onesimus." On the other hand, Paul was saying, "If Onesimus has incurred any debt, if he has done you any wrong, if there is any price to pay, charge it to my account. I will pay his penalty." Paul just laid it out.

There was a surprising, yet somehow familiar transaction taking place in Paul's identification with Onesimus. Onesimus gained Paul's standing. Paul was bearing Onesimus' penalty. Do you see it there?

Does this ring a bell for anybody? I hope there is something very, very familiar with what Paul did here, because what we have here is a marvelous display of Christ-like love. For in a much more serious context, where the stakes are infinitely higher, Christ has stood in for us in just this way. We see the doctrine of imputation being manifested here in the life of Paul on behalf of his child in the faith. This mirror what Christ has done for us.

Before the great Judge of all the earth, Jesus of Nazareth has declared of each person trusting in Him, all of their iniquities, all of their transgressions, all of the moral debt that these sins have accrued, "Charge that to my account." And there on Calvary's cross, He was crucified to pay the price for our sin.

But that is not all. Because we can hear Christ before the Father in Heaven, speaking of each of His chosen children in the church, "Accept him. Receive him as you receive me. Accept her in the same way that you accept me, because my righteousness and my merit is transferred to my children. They are clothed with this." So we have the beautiful portrait of the Gospel.

In Paul's appeal to Philemon, Gospel theology is saturating his commitment to Onesimus. Paul, growing in love, was treating Onesimus in the way that Christ had treated him. He was growing in Christlikeness.

As the Holy Spirit is having His way in us, forming Christlikeness in us, such sacrificial love is going to grow and increase in our lives, where we put our life, our finances, and our reputation on the line for those that we are standing in with. It is a beautiful picture. There are so many ways that this can be carried out.

Imagine you walk into a room and hear a handful of people that are whispering, gossiping and talking about your friend behind their back. You tell them, "That person you are talking about, let me point out some of the good qualities that I love about them." Stick out your neck!

There are so many ways in which this can happen. Paul was putting himself on the line for Onesimus, and this is Christ-like love. I think he did it, knowing that Philemon was also a man of God and that the Holy Spirit would use that situation to trigger things in Philemon too.

To help us grow in Christ-like love, we see the example of love that lays its life on the line. We continue and we see a second aspect of Christ-like love.

To help us grow in Christ-like love, we:

2. The candor of love (1:19-20)

Candor is all about honest, straightforward talk. It is leveling with people about what your desires are in a relationship, rather than making them have to play guessing games.

Having made this very bold and sincere statement that Paul was willing to stand in and willing to pay the fines and the debts that this young man has accrued, Paul both reenforced the very strong statement that he made, but he also got to what he was getting at.

Paul expressed to Philemon what he wanted. So having said, "Tell Philemon. Write it down Timothy, if he has wronged you in any way, charge it to my account." Then Paul told Timothy to give him the pen. Then Paul continued. Verse 19:

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.

"I love this young man, and I want you to benefit me by the way that you benefit him." Paul just laid it out.

This is an incredible paragraph because, once again, Paul wrote with his own hand and he stated it flat out.

¹⁹I, Paul, write this with my own hand: I will repay it

“I will repay his debt. If money and payback is what you want, then fine, money and payback is what you will get. You can tabulate what he has stolen from your vault. You can calculate damages in terms of services lost. You can even factor in whatever embarrassment you think you have experienced in the eyes of your peers. Add it all up. If he has wronged you at all, I will repay it.”

What is so amazing about this is that at this point in the papyrus manuscript, the writing style would have changed. Same Koine Greek alphabet, but the writing style would have changed. Paul used scribes. Timothy was his scribe in this case. When your arms are in shackles, it can be difficult to write, so Timothy was writing for him.

However, at this point Paul told Timothy to give him the pen. So, the letter style changed, and Paul said, “I, Paul, I will repay it.” Understand that this was a signed promissory note. It was an ancient IOU. It would have carried weight and legal validity. So Philemon could have taken this to the office official in the town square when Paul came to town and told them that he owed him. It was a signed IOU. This was pretty significant.

However, Paul continued and he said, “If you are going to go that route and if you are going to keep score, here are some more things to consider. Consider the other things that are on the ledger. As you calculate the sum, keep in mind what you already owe me. Remember my services rendered, breaking into the Gentile world, your region of the world, with the Good News that Jesus Christ saves sinners. Now I am bearing scars and wounds from the blows I received from certain Jews who did not like me doing that.”

“Philemon, you make sure you factor that in. Also factor in my personal ministry to you individually, giving you the Gospel, bringing you to the very gate of the Kingdom, being the human vessel used by the Messiah to give you the Gospel. You owe me your very self, so factor that in, and what are we left with?”

Then Paul just cut to the chase. Paul leveled with Philemon. Speaking as a friend, Paul gave it to him straight and said, “You have benefited from me, now I want to benefit from you. I love Onesimus. I consider him my child. I saw his eyes opened to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. I saw him as he was born again before my very eyes, by the work of the Holy Spirit in his heart. I have tender affection for him. He is my very heart. Don’t be harsh with him. It was painful for me to send him back. I love him, so don’t hang his transgressions over his head. Forgive him freely. Honor him. Treat him as a partner. Treat him as a brother. Refresh my heart”

Paul just flat out leveled with Philemon. “I want for you to refresh my heart in this way; by receiving him with such honor.” Paul said to refresh my heart. He was echoing the language used earlier in the epistle where he said, “Your love has refreshed so many other hearts, now I need it to refresh my heart, because guess what, messenger mail man Tychicus, is going to come back and let me know how this all went down. My heart is either going to be broken or it is going to be lifted up with fresh joy.”

Do you see how Paul in a complicated and complex situation gave it to Philemon straight? He spoke with candor. Love speaks with candor. Sometimes somebody has done something to offend you. You are grieved about it. It is hindering a relationship with that person. Do you deal with it straight on or do you place some guessing game on them. Well they did me wrong and they should know that they did me wrong, so I'm going to wait until they figure it out. Then maybe we will talk. No!

As we think about Paul's candor, we also see how ongoing conflicts in the body of Christ, they don't only effect the people who are immediately involved in that conflict. They effect other people too. So when there is lingering resentment in the air, it affects not only the people involved, but also the people around them.

When there is reconciliation and the situation is healed because it has been dealt with, we can say with Paul, "My heart is refreshed." We just see love candor. We have to have boldness, strength, and grace from God to level with people and have the ability to be leveled with. Neither of those are necessarily easy. How do we pull it off then? That will come with the final point of this morning's sermon. It is because God will help us.

We see the candor of love laid out for us here. Notice also:

3. The optimism of love (1:21-22)

God has done great things and God will do great things. Jesus is a mighty Redeemer! Just like we spoke about in recent weeks, if He can bridge the gap between heaven and earth, He can bridge the gaps between His people.

Paul expected this. He said this in Verses 21 and 22:

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.

Several years before writing the book of Philemon, Paul wrote I Corinthians. I Corinthians has the glorious love chapter. I Corinthians Chapter 13 is where Paul laid out sixteen different qualities of agape love as God empowers it among the people that comprise the church.

There is a crescendo toward the end of how love is described, where Paul said in Verse 7:

⁷Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Loves bears all things and endures all things. That is very real honest about the fact that sometimes things are difficult. We are not talking about easy situations when we use the words bearing and enduring things. Yet in the midst of those things, love also believes all things and hopes all things.

There is optimism about what God can do. In these relational situations, it is called faith. And we ask the Lord to fill us with faith and we depend on His working to carry out the desired end.

²¹Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say

Then Paul went on to say:

²²At the same time, prepare a guest room for me

Some people read this and they see it as a veiled threat. I have read this in multiple commentaries. Like, okay there is some accountability right now. Okay, Paul is coming to town and he is expecting to see that it has gone down the way that he expected it. So, watch out, Philemon, the big kahuna is coming to town and you better watch out.

That is not tone that Paul used here at all. Rather, his tone was full of grace. It was full of joyful anticipation of what the Spirit was going to do in Philemon's heart, overcoming his impulses of resentment, and paving the way for growth in love.

Paul said to prepare a place for him. He was confident in Philemon even in the midst of his radical and audacious requests, where he told Philemon that he was going to receive him as a brother and a partner in Christ, where he even suggested in his comments about how useful Onesimus was to him and how he longed for him to be there with him side by side, even suggesting along the way for Philemon to let him go. Give him his slip of manumission. In other words, that formal release from bondage. That had been clearly hinted at, though not directly asserted in this letter.

When Paul was saying, "you are going to do even more than I have asked." What is left except for Philemon to tell Onesimus that he was a free man? Paul was saying to Philemon that even in the midst of the kind of crazy things being stated in that context of First Century Rome, he was confident that Philemon was going to continue praying for his release from prison, and that through the very prayers of his brother and the church in his house, he was going to be released, so that when he faced psycho Nero at the end of his trial, it would be thumbs up and Paul would be out of prison. It was a joyful, joyful anticipation.

Paul's heart and mind and thinking were filled with faith. Paul was also doing what he had recently written in Philippians 4 and Verse 8:

⁸Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.

In the midst of difficult relationships, our brains becomes a manufacturer of extreme drama. Our brains will start turning over fiction in our minds. Our heartbeats will increase based on the fiction that we are thinking about that person.

Our thinking is still touched with remnants of sin and it is so easy to believe the worst, and to be suspicious, thinking that they are the one's gossiping about us all the time, when they are probably not even thinking about us. Sometimes that happens. But our brains manufacture it about twenty-times more than it actually happens.

So pray to the Spirit, "Help me to envision good things and to be fueled by those good things, so that I can walk in faith and hope." That's what Paul was doing here, was he not? That is exactly what was happening here.

Here is another interesting detail. Notice the word *knowing* in Verse 21:

²¹Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say

The nuance of that word *knowing* is *seeing*. That is a seeing word. It is often used in context of actual eyesight. Seeing things. And we have the same figure of speech now. When something clicks in our heads, we say, "Oh, I see. I see it!" So Paul was envisioning things in his mind and when he envisioned things by the work of the Spirit and by the discipline that he was practicing by the power of the Spirit, he was rejecting all of the negative thoughts that would destroy him internally, and he was saying, "I'm going to renew my mind with visions of grandeur and glory and grace and reconciliation.

Paul was thinking, "It is going to be so sweet when I am there at your house, Philemon. Wow, what a meal we are going to have and I just see me and Onesimus and others charging east and charging west, wherever we go with the Gospel." This was the kind of thing Paul was picturing.

When you fuel negative things in your mind, it is going to diminish your quality of life. It will drive you nuts, but when we are praying for the best, seeing the best, and having the optimism of love, there is life and health.

There is all this language of self-sacrifice, but if I am being honest with you, there is so much self-interest. Me, me, me, and my rights. What about poor me? That lives inside of me. Selfless sacrifice is the way of Christ, but there is so much self-absorption in us.

We need humble candor and honesty, but it is so much easier to keep things bottled up and remain resentful. Believing the best when our minds are suspicion factories, how? How? We get that in the final verse of the book.

4. The source of love (1:23-25)

Let's read Verses 23 through 25:

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.

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. The grace of Christ the King be with the immaterial part of your human nature, causing you to glow with divine love.

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

The grace of Jesus would be the source of love that would work in the heart of Philemon and his wife, Apphia, and his son, Archippus, and all the brothers and sisters in Colossae. It is that same grace of Jesus Christ that would be at work amongst the people of Bethel Grace Baptist Church, helping them to love, empowering them to love, in the way that Christ loves.

Paul was anticipating the love of Jesus to be empowered by the grace of Jesus. Paul bookended the book of Philemon just like he did with Colossians, with prayers of grace. At the very beginning of the book of Philemon, Paul said:

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

And also here at the end:

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

We must understand that grace is not only an attribute of God, but when we do the doctrine of grace in the pages of Scripture, we see that grace is also power from God's Throne to change things in this world. Not only is grace God's tender mercy toward ill-deserving sinners but, brothers and sisters, praise God that it is that attribute. That is the grace of God.

In addition to that, grace is God's awesome power to raise sinners from death to life and help them to grow in love. So Paul was saying, "May God's grace be at work inside of you, knowing that you are loved by Jesus, and helping you to love like Him."

It is the same grace that continues today. The grace was there in Rome as Paul wrote. It would extend to Colossae. It was already working there and it extended across the century. It is moving here in our midst. How is God prompting you by grace?

Paul concluded with a list of names. There are of five of them. One of them is repeated twice. There are four fellow workers of his and then there is one glorious and wonderful Name mixed in as well—the Name that is above all names. The Name that is lifted up infinitely high. The Name of Jesus Christ the Lord.

Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke are gone from this earth. But what is interesting is that at that point in time, Jesus was also gone from this earth. He was resurrected and ascended up on high, but Paul was speaking of Him as though He was a very present help. So close. So present, that He works within us. The grace of Jesus lighting us up. And it is by grace that we can love in the way that Jesus loves and in the way that He calls us and leads us to love.

If you are here and you are not a Christian, you have not come to faith in Christ, you are now beaconed by the Gospel call to come to faith in Christ Jesus, who lived to fulfill all righteousness

on behalf of sinners like us. He went to the cross, shedding His blood, the blood that cleanses sinners like you and me, so that by grace through faith, God the Just is satisfied to look on Christ and pardon you and give you a place in His Eternal Kingdom. It is by grace and grace alone that we are saved. Trust in Jesus. Confess your sin. Call upon His Name. Receive life in Jesus Christ.

If you are here and you are a Christian, Christ saved you. He upholds you, and He teaches and empowers you to forgive and to love and to reconcile and to refresh. May He lead us. May He help us grow.

One final little morsel. What ever happened with all of this? What happened with Onesimus and Philemon? The Bible does not complete the story, so we don't know it. We only know the details we have in this letter.

However, there was an early church historian named Ignatius. He died in 107 A.D and he wrote about the affairs of the early church. In his writings, we read of one, the Bishop of Ephesus, named Onesimus, who died in the year A.D. 95. The region and the timing all lines up perfectly.

I don't know if this is the same Onesimus, but there was somebody named Onesimus who lived at the same of this Onesimus. It all seems so scrumptious and fitting, because whoever Onesimus of Ephesus was, he must have had some seriously good training to have that trust. It all makes sense.

Not exactly sure, but what we do know is what is in Scripture and what we do know is what is right before our eyes, and Jesus gives grace and He does immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine according to His power that is at work within us.

We receive grace through the Word. We receive grace through singing the Word. We receive grace through suffering. Let's pray, then we will go the Lord's Supper after we sing.