

A Good Way to Solve a Problem Philemon

I'm going to do something today I've never done in my 25 years of ministry. So admittedly I'm a little nervous and I hope you will be patient and tolerant. In 25 years of ministry I have never preached on the book of Philemon, so I'm going to today. Why, after all these years am I going to preach on this, the shortest of Paul's 13 letters to make it into the NT? It has been a neglected, sometimes disdained book in the Bible. The great Latin scholar Jerome, author of the Latin Vulgate Bible, did not believe Philemon should be included in the NT. In the second century, the ancient Syrian church dismissed Philemon because it supposedly dealt with trivial things. As late as 1955, the well-respected biblical scholar John Knox wrote in his commentary on Philemon that it contained little theological or ethical teaching. Most modern pastors don't preach from this book because its primary subject has to do with slavery, an institution that no longer captures the attention of modern Western Christians. So why preach from this obscure, miniscule book? Because it's there! Because I believe that all Scripture is inspired and is profitable for instruction and guidance for the Christian community. And now that I've read Philemon slowly, critically, and with the intent to extract its value for my people, I'm sorry I waited so long.

Let me begin by sharing the basic story of this personal letter of Paul to Philemon. Paul is in prison, where he spent a good portion of his latter years, probably in Ephesus. He is writing to a friend, a brother in Christ, whose name is Philemon. Philemon is evidently a relatively wealthy Christian because he owns slaves and the church meets in his home. He is married to a woman named Apphia, and at one point he owned a slave named Onesimus. Onesimus has run away from Philemon, but we're not sure why. It could've been that he was treated cruelly as many slaves were. Perhaps he merely sought his freedom which is an instinct common to all men. There are some who believe he was stolen and taken away from Philemon. In any case, Philemon is without a slave that he owned, and he wasn't compensated for his loss.

In the providence of God, Onesimus ends up with Paul in prison and becomes his helper. We don't know if he sought Paul out because he knew Philemon or if their paths crossed unintentionally. Whatever prompted their encounter, Onesimus was converted to the Christian faith through the witness of Paul. He becomes a beloved helper to Paul while he is in prison.

And yet we have a problem. There is a Christian slave owner whose slave has probably run away. Though the slave may have stolen from Philemon earlier, he is now a Christian, and Paul is working for reconciliation. Paul would like for Onesimus to be freed, but not so he can ride off into the wild blue yonder living a carefree life. He wants Onesimus to return to Philemon, not as a slave this time, but as a brother and partner in Christ. He would like Philemon to receive him as such and he appeals for reconciliation to take place between the two of them. This would benefit all parties, including the church that meets in Philemon's home.

There are a number of theological and ethical issues in this letter, but today I want to focus on the practical application of solving problems. Paul is modeling an excellent model for resolving a problem. This particular problem is relational, but if you think about it, all problems ultimately are relational. Money problems eventually affect relationships.

Job pressures typically manifest themselves in relational problems. Problems at work often center on dealing with difficult people. Political problems are solved when relations improve.

I see 4 things, in this letter, that strike me as helpful in solving problems. And I want to commend these to you as you deal with your own problems at home, the office, and the classroom.

I. Seek to influence rather than control.

Too often, when we are faced with a relational problem, we want to end the problem with a decree. We want to tell people what to do and have them do it. That seems to be the easiest solution. My daughter comes home with a speeding ticket and I want to tell her, "Don't speed. Don't let this happen again." End of discussion. Problem solved. A colleague at work isn't doing his job the right way so you want to tell her, "Do it like this. Do it the way I showed you in the first place." Your husband spends too much money so you demand to take control of the checkbook and credit cards. All his expenditures must be approved by you. Controlling people is what we want to do, because it appears to be the quickest way to a solution.

Notice what Paul did. He had led Philemon to Christ. He is his father in the faith and perhaps father of the church that is meeting in his home. So he writes to Philemon, *"Although in Christ I could be bold and order you to do what you ought to do, yet I appeal to you on the basis of love"* (v 8). Paul asserts his authority but doesn't utilize it. He keeps it in check. Instead of making him receive Onesimus back as a slave or in freedom, he appeals to him on the basis of love. Look down further at v 14 where Paul writes, *"I did not want to do anything without your consent, so that any favor you do will be spontaneous and not forced"* (v 14). He wants Philemon to receive Onesimus back as a brother, not just a slave. He wants reconciliation to take place between this runaway slave and this wronged slave owner. He doesn't want to be a control agent. He wants to be an agent of influence. In this Paul is following the teaching of Jesus. When Jesus' disciples argued about who will be greatest among them, Jesus responded, *"You know, the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great men exercise authority over them. It shall not be so among you"* (Mt 20:25-28). Jesus rejects the right of any brother or sister in Christ to impose his or her will upon another.

Can you see the wisdom in this? Paul is not going to force his hand. He's not going to make Philemon obey this as an order, because if he did, Philemon would be denied the opportunity to receive Onesimus back in love and forgiveness. If Philemon was forced to receive the slave as a brother, then he wouldn't experience the joy of offering forgiveness and true reconciliation.

II. Seek a win-win solution rather than a winner take all solution.

The next thing we notice in Paul's dealing with his problem is his determination to affect a win-win solution rather than a winner-take-all solution. So often we assume that resolutions to problems must necessarily produce a winner and a loser. If Mr. Jones wants A and Mrs. Jones wants B, then the solution will be either Mr. Jones gets what he wants and Mrs. Jones misses out, or Mrs. Jones gets her way and Mr. Jones is left holding the bag. Somebody's got to win and somebody's got to lose. Everything is the Super Bowl; you have a winner and a loser.

There were 3 people, at least involved in this problem. Philemon had lost a slave, and perhaps some money or possessions in the process. A win for him would be to have all that back. But it would mean that Onesimus had to return to his master and perhaps receive punishment. Onesimus, had experienced freedom from slavery and had found new life in Christ. His name, which means “useful”, became testimony to the usefulness he had become to Paul while he was in prison. A win for Onesimus would be to solidify his freedom and grow in his usefulness to Christ, the church, and in his own estimation of himself. But that seemingly would mean Philemon would remain without his slave or compensation for him. Paul is also involved in this triangular relationship. A win for him would be to keep Onesimus because of his usefulness and partnership while in prison.

But notice that Paul isn't locked into this win-lose outcome and he has enough imagination to propose an outcome where everyone wins. Notice how he phrases it in vv 15-16, “*Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back for good – no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother. He is very dear to me but even dearer to you, both as a man and as a brother in the Lord. So if you consider me a partner, welcome him as you would welcome me*” (vv 15-17).

Paul is proposing that Onesimus return and serve Philemon (a win for Philemon), but not as a slave. Instead he would return as a brother and partner to Philemon (an even better win for Philemon and a win for Onesimus). Furthermore, even though Paul doesn't want to give Onesimus up, he would be even more valuable to Paul if he were to do this because Paul would know Philemon and Onesimus were reconciled and the church would be strengthened by witnessing this reconciliation. And Paul's ultimate objective is for the strengthening and health of the church. Everybody wins.

When we are having a problem with another person it would help us come to resolution if we looked for a win-win solution. That means we need to understand not only what the other person wants, but why. If we are willing to take the time and think creatively we are likely to find a way for both sides to win. This isn't about compromise, each person getting a little of what they want. This is about finding a path, that perhaps was first unseen, that would be better for all parties involved.

Which leads to the third step in solving a problem,...

III. Offer a new vision based on a new way to see the problem

A subtle but revolutionary move that Paul made in seeking freedom for Onesimus and just compensation for Philemon is proposing a different way to think about the problem. The subtle move is Paul's naming Onesimus as a brother and partner instead of a slave. Look at verse 16 again when Paul calls Onesimus “*no longer a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother*” (v 16). Paul had come to see Onesimus as a brother, a partner, a man. He knew Onesimus came to him under the status of a runaway slave, but he viewed him differently now. Now Onesimus was in Christ, and therefore he was no longer merely a slave. Perhaps Paul had in mind the words he had spoken to the Galatians, “There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal 3:28). Paul was speaking of the equality we have in Christ, regardless of our ethnicity, social standing, or gender. He offered the vision, created by Jesus, of seeing people as one in Christ before seeing all the other distinguishing factors in their lives that tend to separate them from people.

This isn't just semantics. This isn't a trick of language. It is the means to changing lives, restoring dignity, and nurturing reconciliation by viewing and naming people as brothers/sisters in Christ rather than naming and viewing them in a way to separate ourselves from them.

Victor Hugo's novel, *Les Miserables*, is a story about Jean Valjean, who was sentenced to a nineteen-year prison term for stealing a loaf of bread. During his imprisonment, Valjean hardened into a tough convict. No one could beat him in a fight. No one could break his will. Valjean finally earned his release but found he had nowhere to go. He wandered through the village seeking shelter until a generous bishop had mercy on him. That night, while the bishop and his sister fell asleep, Valjean rose from his bed, rummaged through the house, and crept off into the darkness with the family silver. Three policemen knocked on the bishop's door the next morning with Valjean in hand. They had caught him with the stolen silver and were ready to send him back to prison for life. But the bishop responded in a way no one expected: "So here you are!" he said to Valjean. "I'm delighted to see you! Had you forgotten that I gave you the candlesticks as well? They're silver like the rest, and worth a good 200 francs. Did you forget to take them?" Valjean was startled and stared at the old man with an expression no words could convey. Valjean was no thief, the bishop told the policemen: "This silver was my gift to him." When the policemen left, the bishop gave the candlesticks to his guest, who was now speechless and trembling. "Do not forget, do not ever forget," said the bishop. "You have promised to use the money to make yourself an honest man." The power of the bishop's act, which defied every human instinct for revenge, changed Valjean's life forever. By naming Valjean as a recipient of gifts rather than a criminal, Valjean commits to dedicate himself to helping other people in need.

When we view people in a way that highlights our connections rather than differences, there is greater chance to solve a problem. When we focus on our equality in Christ rather than cultural, racial, or social differences we are on the pathway toward developing *koinonia* rather than conflict. We can see our brotherhood and sisterhood instead of our divisions.

IV. Be willing to be part of the solution, rather than merely identifying the problem.

Most of us are pretty good at identifying problems. We look at the government and notice deficit spending, bailing out banks, and fighting too many overseas wars when we need to solve our problems at home. We look at church and notice the gaps in service to a particular group of people, perhaps our own needs aren't being met. We look in our homes and can readily identify the shortcomings of everyone else who lives there. It's pretty easy to identify problems. It's not as easy, but it's also fairly easy to identify solutions. The government should cut spending and leave Iraq. Our church should tear down the two homes we own and build a parking lot. Our kids should put their cell phones away and read a book, preferably the Bible. Our coworker should carry a greater share of the workload. It's not all that difficult to identify problems and offer solutions. The difficult thing is to identify how you will contribute to the solution.

Notice a very simple thing Paul did to solve the problem vexing the church meeting in Philemon's home. He wrote to Philemon in v 18, "*If he has done you any wrong or owes you anything, charge it to me. I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand. I will pay it back*" (v 18-19). Paul is willing to be part of the solution. A part of the problem is the

lost money Philemon has endured because of Onesimus' departure. This lost money could include money stolen by Onesimus. We're not exactly sure what kind of loss Philemon has taken, but Paul, who is in prison, is willing to compensate him for it. Paul doesn't owe this to Philemon. In fact, Philemon owes his place in the church to Paul, for it was Paul that won him to Christ. Philemon is indebted to Paul, but Paul is offering to compensate Philemon.

I have found that the people who really are good at solving problems are the ones who are willing to be part of the solution. There are lots of whiners out there and in the church. There are not so many problem solvers, because solving a problem means willing to be part of the solution. And the most effective problem solvers are those who are willing to make a sacrifice themselves to solve the problem. In a church, the problem solvers are those who are willing to invest their time, energy, and money in sacrificial ways. In a office, the problem solvers are those willing to do the hard work of really listening to the differing views being aired. In the home, the problem solvers are those who are willing to step toward others in love with whom there is conflict. In every area of life, solving problems means we make ourselves part of the solution, not as dictators of the process, but as willing, collaborative participants in the outcome.

Conclusion

Who said there was no practical value in Paul's letter to Philemon? Philemon offers one of the wisest, most universal models for solving a relational problem of any literature in the world. Politicians, business managers, high school principals, marriage counselors, criminologists, and church ministers should read this letter to see its implications for solving problems. International relations could benefit from the wisdom of this letter as well as parents trying to raise children in the 21st century. I hope you'll read it again when you are facing a conflict. There are pearls in this shell whose value is beyond imagination. Paul has offered us a model on how to solve a problem. The model is just as relevant today as it was 2000 years ago when slavery was integral to the economy of the Roman Empire. Here are the steps to solving a problem:

1. Seek to influence rather than control
2. Seek win-win solutions rather than win-lose solutions
3. Look at the problem in a new way
4. Become part of the solution rather than merely identifying the problem.

Do this and you'll see a number of problems resolved in a way that would honor Christ.