

An Appeal of Love

King of Glory Lutheran

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¹Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother,

To Philemon our dear friend and co-worker, ²to Apphia our sister, to Archippus our fellow soldier, and to the church in your house:

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

⁴When I remember you in my prayers, I always thank my God ⁵because I hear of your love for all the saints and your faith toward the Lord Jesus. ⁶I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective when you perceive all the good that we may do for Christ. ⁷I have indeed received much joy and encouragement from your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you, my brother.

⁸For this reason, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do your duty, ⁹yet I would rather appeal to you on the basis of love—and I, Paul, do this as an old man, and now also as a prisoner of Christ Jesus. ¹⁰I am appealing to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I have become during my imprisonment. ¹¹Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful both to you and to me. ¹²I am sending him, that is, my own heart, back to you. ¹³I wanted to keep him with me, so that he might be of service to me in your place during my imprisonment for the gospel; ¹⁴but I preferred to do nothing without your consent, in order that your good deed might be voluntary and not something forced. ¹⁵Perhaps this is the reason he was separated from you for a while, so that you might have him back forever, ¹⁶no longer as a slave but more than a slave, 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, welcome him as you would welcome me. ¹⁸If he has wronged you in any way, or owes you anything, charge that to my account. ¹⁹I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand: I will repay it. I say nothing about your owing me even your own self. ²⁰Yes, brother, let me have this benefit from you in the Lord! Refresh my heart in Christ. ²¹Confident of your obedience, I am writing to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say.

Paul asks Philemon to accept back Philemon's former slave. Onesimus (the slave) has become a Christian, therefore he is now a sibling in Christ not only to Paul but also to Philemon. Paul's letter is persuasive, an appeal of love. How do we as Christians appeal on behalf of others on the basis of Christ's love?

God's grace and peace to you! Our summer sermon series on people in the Bible officially ended last week. Yet this lovely letter came up in the regularly prescribed readings for this weekend. Guessing that it might be unfamiliar to some of us, I decided it would be our preaching text.

Here's a short summary of the story, in case those 21 verses went by too quickly. A well-to-do man named Philemon had accepted the Gospel of Jesus Christ. His wife Apphia and son Archippus had worked together with the apostle Paul. They had gone home to Colosseae and there began to have other Christians meet in their own home. They had a house church, as was common for the churches Paul was founding.

But Philemon also had slaves. It was as normal in that time as having electricity is for us. It sounds terrible in the year of 2022, but it was perfectly normal for well-to-do people to have one or several slaves.

Onesimus was his name and he had run away. He was now a fugitive on the run. Should he return home, his master Philemon had the right to have Onesimus executed on the spot. If Philemon was merciful enough to let him live, Onesimus would have the letter F (for fugitive) branded on his forehead; a mark that would remain with him forever.

Onesimus had heard Paul preach, or at least been in contact with Paul. Now he has converted to Christianity, and Paul feels warmly toward Onesimus, as a father would to his own son. As lovely as this is, Onesimus' being a Christian further complicates matters, because he truly ought to make amends to his owner, Philemon.

Therefore, Paul uses his influence upon Philemon. This is no ordinary letter. Every phrase in this 468-word composition is appealing to Philemon's faith. It is an appeal of love and forgiveness. Paul is persuasive.

The letter begins in the form of the time with greetings and thanksgivings. But from the very first, Paul doesn't miss an opportunity.

I always thank my God ⁵because I hear of your love for all the saints and your faith toward the Lord Jesus. ⁷I have indeed received much joy and encouragement from your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you, my brother.

Then comes a punchline. *⁶I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective when you perceive all the good that we may do for Christ.* Listen to it from The Message translation: I keep praying that this faith we hold in common keeps showing up in the good things we do, and that people recognize Christ in all of it. Hint, hint. I'm about to ask you Philemon to do a good thing, because of the faith we share.

Then Paul pushes even harder, yet appeals in love.

I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do your duty, ⁹yet I would rather appeal to you on the basis of love.

Paul knows, as the evangelist of the time, he could order Philemon to accept Onesimus back without hurting him. But instead, Paul appeals on Christ's love that they both know.

You and I know, we act in certain ways, because of our faith. Our basic human nature might be kind enough, yet because we are commanded in our baptismal waters to let Christ's light shine; we are kind to the grumpy employee. Christ's love encourages us, no, compels us to act in ways which are according to God's will.

Paul again, *Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful both to you and to me. ¹²I am sending him, that is, my own heart, back to you.*

Maybe Onesimus, the slave, was lazy. Perhaps he was disobedient. Maybe he ran off with some of Philemon's money or goods. But now, as a Christian, he too, will be a partner in sharing the news of Jesus Christ. Paul implies, "So when you see him at your front door, Philemon, welcome him as you would welcome me."

Imagine that! A slave who returns to their master could be killed right away. If Philemon kept Onesimus, he might be the laughingstock of his neighbors. Paul is persuasive. 'Imagine, that I'm standing there. Welcome this, now your brother in Christ, as you would welcome me.'

Paul goes on to indicate that Onesimus could be very useful to Paul during his own imprisonment. The letter continues with even more persuasive, even manipulative phrases. Paul writes, "I say nothing, about your owing me even your own self."

Here's the question. How do appeal to others on the basis of our Christian faith and love? Does our language reveal the faith we hold in our hearts?

We've all heard of the new council ban on encampments of our city's homeless population. As we read the news articles, as we listen to the arguments, is the language framed as 'us' against 'them'? Or are we speaking on the basis of love?

For most everyone is enslaved to something. Poor people can become enslaved to the system that keeps them poor. Rich people can become enslaved to their money. Politicians can become enslaved to their popularity and those potential votes. Young girls with no home get enslaved by selling their bodies. Teenagers get addicted to drugs.

At the very least, Paul is asking Philemon to treat Onesimus with dignity; like a real human being.

Jesus Christ asked the same thing of the people that followed him.

"See those children? Treat them with respect. See this prostitute? Or that leper? God loves them. So can you."

We know it is easier said than done, which is why Paul writes so emphatically. The stakes are high. One man's life is hanging in the balance. Yet there are many people's lives hanging in the balance every day, right now, that you and I can do something about.

We can speak to those in authority, those who have means, those who govern, those who have power, to change systems. We can advocate for those who have no voice, not on the basis of politics, but appeal on the basis of God's love. Like Paul, we can appeal for others on the basis of God's love.

Tradition has it that Onesimus was spared. He is known as **The Holy Apostle Onesimus** in the Eastern Orthodox Church. He may also be the same Onesimus named by Ignatius of Antioch (died c. 107) as bishop in Ephesus. If so, Onesimus went from slave to brother to bishop.

I can only imagine that Bishop Onesimus in his old age, would remember St. Paul and give thanksgiving in prayer for the old letter, the appeal of love.
Amen.