

Main Idea: As we examine Paul’s prayer for Philemon in Philemon 4-7 we discover that God-honoring prayer should include three elements.

I. Prayer should include the expression of thanks (4-5).

- A. Paul thanked God because his friend exhibited faith.
- B. Paul thanked God because his friend exhibited love.
 1. He did so because God receives honor from this.
 2. He did so because God deserves the credit for this.

II. Prayer should include the expression of requests (6).

- A. Request #1: May the sharing of your faith be effectual.
 1. What we have because of Christ should be shared with others.
 2. What we have because of Christ should produce visible evidence of Christ in our lives.
- B. Request #2: May you grasp every good thing you have in Christ.
 1. In Christ we have everything we need to be right with God.
 2. In Christ we have everything we need to be right with each other.

III. Prayer should lead to action (7ff.).

- A. Paul affirmed that his friend demonstrated love towards others.
- B. Paul asked his friend to demonstrate love towards one particular problem person named Onesimus.

Make It Personal: Ask yourself the following questions...

1. Do I have real faith?
2. Am I sharing my faith with others?
3. What demonstration of faith does God desire to see most in my life today?

We’ve been learning about prayer this summer by examining the prayers of Paul. Thus far we’ve looked at the prayers he prayed for various churches, such as his prayer for the congregations in Thessalonica, in Ephesus, Philippi, and so on. This week and next we’ll consider what he prayed for two *individuals*, for Philemon this week and Timothy next week.

How do you pray for a friend who has been wronged, and specifically wronged by a problem person who has come back into their life? Pretty relevant question, isn’t it? Do you have any friends who have problem people in their lives, and do you ever struggle to know how to pray for them? That’s what Paul faced with Philemon.

Philemon was a breath of fresh air to Paul. Not only was he a personal friend, more significantly, he was his spiritual son, and he was facing quite a challenge.

Philemon, a well-to-do believer in Christ, happened to have a slave by the name of Onesimus. By all indications, Philemon had treated Onesimus well, but Onesimus chose to rob Philemon and skip town with the loot. In God’s providence, the runaway slave ended up in the city of Rome, which just happened to be where Paul was at the time, in Rome and in prison in fact. Somehow Onesimus met Paul, and Paul introduced him to Jesus Christ. So this fugitive slave, Onesimus, became a follower of Jesus and actually became a great source of encouragement to Paul.

The time came, however, for Onesimus to face up to his past (every believer must do so, and though painful, such obedience is the evidence of true faith). So Paul sent him back to Philemon, but not empty-handed. He sent this letter to give instructions to Philemon on how to handle the delicate situation facing him.

Please realize that Philemon had a dilemma on his hands. First century Roman law permitted slave owners to execute a rebellious slave. In fact, owners were encouraged to do so. Since there were 60,000,000 slaves in the Roman empire, slave holders constantly guarded against the danger of revolt. If a slave ran away, at best he was branded with a red-hot iron on his forehead with the letter ‘F’ (standing for ‘*fugitivus*’ which means ‘runaway’). At worst, he was crucified.

But Philemon was a Christian. What should he do with Onesimus? If he forgave him, what would the other masters and slaves think? If he punished him, how would it affect his testimony, not to mention how would it affect his relationship with Onesimus who was now his brother in Christ?

That was the intent of Paul’s letter, to show Philemon how to handle this situation in a way that would honor the Lord Jesus Christ.

If we are Christians then we ought to respond to difficult situations differently than others do, in fact, than *we used* to before God saved us. I ought to be a different person on the job, in the home, at ball practice, when spending time with friends, in *every* area of my life, than I was prior to conversion. I ought to be a different person when people wrong me. And if Christ is my Lord and I'm following His example, I will be different.

That's what this letter is all about, urging one man to choose the God-honoring response in a very difficult situation. Rather than going with the crowd and doing what the other masters might have done, he needed to choose to please Christ. And Paul wrote this letter to help him know exactly what would please Christ.

Yet Paul did something else to help Philemon deal with this problem. He *prayed* for Philemon, knowing that Philemon needed more than just counsel, even good counsel. He needed *power*, divine power to implement that counsel. And so do the friends for whom you're burdened. Yes, they need to know what to do, but they also need the will to do it.

And that's where prayer enters. Dr. Lewis Sperry Chafer observed, "Winning men is more a work of pleading for souls than a service of pleading with them." Hudson Taylor put it this way, "It is possible to move men, through God, by prayer alone."^[1] John Wesley, "Give me one hundred preachers who fear nothing but sin, and desire nothing but God, and I care not a straw whether they be clergymen or laymen; such alone will shake the gates of hell and set up the kingdom of heaven on earth. God does nothing but in answer to prayer."^[2]

It's Paul's prayer for Philemon we'll examine today. I'll preach on it this morning, and we'll discuss its implications in our home fellowships this evening. As we look at Paul's prayer for Philemon in Philemon 4-7 we discover that God-honoring prayer should include three elements.

I. Prayer should include the expression of thanks (4-5).

"I always thank my God as I remember you in my prayers, because I hear about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints."

Paul appreciated Philemon, told God so in prayer, and told Philemon so in this letter. *I thank God when I remember you in my prayers.* In verse 1 he referred to Philemon as a "dear friend" and a "fellow worker." Here he indicates he was hearing reports about Philemon, and what he heard offered further incentive for expressing his appreciation to God.

What was it that Paul heard that thrilled him about his friend and produced thanksgiving to God? Two things. First...

A. Paul thanked God because his friend exhibited faith. And specifically, faith "in the Lord Jesus."

How do you hear about somebody's faith? We're told these days that faith is a very personal thing, between you and God. While faith is personal, if it's real it will manifest itself in tangible, visible ways. Paul indicates he heard about these tangible manifestations of Philemon's faith.

He mentioned one manifestation in verse 2, stating, "and to the church in meets in your home." Philemon didn't just *say* he believed in Christ, but surrendered his home to Christ so that Christ's church could meet there. Some people view their house like it's *theirs*. Philemon understood that since Christ was his Lord that meant his house belonged to Christ (and so did everything else he possessed). His faith showed up in this very tangible way. And so he and his wife did some extra cleaning each week, set up some chairs, maybe fixed some food, gave up some privacy and some "me" time, so the church could meet in their home. In verse 22 Paul told Philemon (he didn't ask, but *told* him!) to prepare a guest room for him, another indication that Philemon viewed his house as a ministry tool for God.

When was the last time you used your home for God's work, to host a home fellowship, to encourage a new family in our church, or to show hospitality to a missionary guest? You say, "How do you know God wants to use my home?" I don't, but have you asked Him if He does? And don't just ask Him about your home. Ask him about your car, your bank account, your schedule, and everything else He has given you. *How do you want to use these things, Lord?* That's the kind of question a person exhibiting real faith will ask, because real faith manifests itself in ways that other people can see and hear about. "I always thank my God...because I *hear about your faith*," says Paul to Philemon. But not just his faith...

B. Paul thanked God because his friend exhibited love. Verse 5 again, "I hear about...your love for all the saints." Philemon wasn't living a self-focused life. Rather he was pouring himself out for the good of others, particularly for the saints, the people of God, and not just for *some* of them but according to Paul, for *all* of the saints. There was no one that Philemon was cold-shouldering in the church. He was doing right toward all the saints because that's what real love does.

Paul says that the reality of Philemon's faith in Jesus and love for Jesus' people caused him to thank God. That's significant. What do you thank God for regarding your friends? Their latest job promotion? Their good health? How

about their *lack* of good health?

A couple of weeks ago I received an email from a friend Dale Lupton who mentioned his glaucoma, which he has had in his right eye for several years, has now moved to his left eye. Dale has been studying the doctrine of God's sovereignty, and wrote this observation, "I thought I understood the sovereignty of God, but after this study, I see that I was only mouthing the words. I now see the relationship between my brokenness and God's sovereignty in an entirely new light... If God had not made me with hypoglycemia and glaucoma and an IgA immune deficiency, resulting in almost daily low blood sugars and sinus/vision problems, I might be out on the golf course every day instead of staying at home reading, studying, and writing; this forces me closer to God and His Word."

When I read those words, I did what Paul did. I *thanked* God. When our friends exhibit tangible manifestations of faith and love, we ought to thank God for it. Paul knew something we tend to forget, and it's the reason he thanked God for expressions of faith and love whenever he saw them, not just in Philemon's case but in several of his New Testament epistles. Again and again we read him saying that he thanked God for faith and love, in his letter to the Colossians (1:4), in both of his letters to the Thessalonians (1:2-3 and 1:3), and here to Philemon. Why? Why did Paul make it a point to thank God when he saw real demonstrations of faith and love? Here are two reasons...

1. *He did so because God receives honor from this.* Anybody can say they believe in God when their health is good, but when Dale affirms that he knows that God is using his glaucoma for good, that kind of faith brings honor to God! And when we see that kind of faith, we ought to thank God!

2. *He did so because God deserves the credit for this.* Beloved, we entered this world as sinners, defying God, and going our own way. If ever an expression of faith and love come from our lives, He deserves the credit for it. His Son made it possible by rescuing us from our self-centeredness. His Spirit makes it possible, for love and faith are the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22-23).

So here's the first element. It's almost always the first element we see in Paul's recorded prayers. Prayer should include the expression of thanks.

II. Prayer should include the expression of requests (6).

Here's the request that Paul brought to the throne of God in Philemon's behalf, verse 6, "I pray that you may be active in sharing your faith, so that you will have a full understanding of every good thing we have in Christ."

I should say at this point that it is very difficult to determine precisely what Paul was asking God in this verse. In fact, it's very difficult even to translate the verse.^[3] Let's start with what is obvious. There are two main clauses in the verse. I'd like to suggest these two clauses function as two prayer requests. Here's the first...

A. Request #1: May the sharing of your faith be effectual. Let's look carefully at the wording of this first clause. "I pray that you may be active in sharing your faith." Here's the KJV rendering, "That the communication of thy faith may become effectual." The question is, "What did Paul mean by those words 'sharing your faith' (NIV) or 'the communication of thy faith' (KJV) in reference to Philemon?" In other words, what did he want to see happen in his friend's life?

The word translated 'sharing' [KJV 'communication'] is *koinonia*. It's often translated "fellowship" [which Schofield used]. But what does it mean to pray that the fellowship of Philemon's faith would be effectual? It seems to refer to verbal activity, as both the KJV and NIV indicate. Paul seems to be praying that Philemon will share his faith verbally. And if that's the case, Paul makes it clear Philemon must not just share it any old way. He says, "I pray that you may be *active* in sharing your faith." The word is *energes* and means "to be at work" or "active." The KJV uses the term "effectual."

But I'm not convinced Paul is limiting his thoughts to verbal activity. If you translate the clause literally, word by word, Paul's request reads, "that the fellowship of thy faith may become working," or "that the sharing of thy faith may become working."

Let me put it this way. There's more than one way to share your faith. One way is to open your mouth and to share with other people about what you believe. That's verbal evangelism, and we're certainly commanded to do it (Acts 1:8; 2 Tim. 4:5). But can we not share our faith in *non-verbal* ways, too? Yes, indeed, by our actions. And what kind of actions, when shared with others, most clearly present our faith? Christlike actions, right? When we do things Christ would do, we are sharing our faith. And what would Christ do if a runaway slave who had cheated him out of some money returned to him and asked for forgiveness?

That's the issue here. Paul wanted Philemon to be active in sharing his faith. I don't think that means primarily that he wanted Philemon to go tell his neighbors about Christ, as important as verbal witnessing is. I think he was praying that Philemon would *show* his neighbors Christ by the way he treated Onesimus.

Do you think that Philemon's handling of Onesimus would affect his neighbors? If he forgave him, it sure would.

They knew what *they* would do if that scoundrel was their slave, and it sure wasn't forgive him. Can't you just hear them? "You did *what*? You *forgave* him? Why in the world would you do *that*?"

Beloved, our unsaved neighbors are watching us, every step we take. And from time to time God gives us an opportunity to share our faith with them, and powerfully so, by the way we respond to problem people.

Consider two realities...

1. *What we have because of Christ should be shared with others.* What do we have because of Christ? Because of Christ we have God's forgiveness, peace, and joy. We don't deserve those things. They are ours solely because of Christ. Because Christ died on the cross to pay our penalty for sin, God canceled our debt. And what we have received we should share with others.

Aren't you glad for what Christ did for you? Don't you want others to know Him? Then share Him with them, by words yes, but by your actions too. When you're wronged, realize He is giving you an opportunity to share your faith with the world.

2. *What we have because of Christ should produce visible evidence of Christ in our lives.* Lots of people these days claim to know Christ, but in the lives of those who truly do there will be fruit, the fruit of Christ's life being reproduced in them. And Paul prayed to that end, asking God in Philemon's behalf: *May the sharing of your faith be effectual.*

What happens when we do share our faith? Notice the second clause in verse 6, "So that you will have a full understanding of every good thing we have in Christ." The KJV takes a different slant by saying, "By the acknowledging of every good thing which is in you in Christ Jesus."

There's a vital connection between these two clauses. When we share our faith, when we get involved in passing on to others what Christ has given us, something happens. We get a fuller understanding of something. Of what? Of every good thing we have in Christ. That's Paul's second request...

B. Request #2: May you grasp every good thing you have in Christ. The truth is, Philemon had great resources, and so do you, if you are in Christ. You are a spiritual billionaire and every spiritual blessing in heavenly places is available to you (Eph 1:3).

But who is it that really taps into these resources? This is so critical to see. If you want to grasp what you have in Christ, you must share it with others.

Granted, it goes both ways. To be able to share your faith with others you must first grasp what you have. ^[4] But to appreciate fully what you do have you must share it with others.

I can attest to that in my own life. Do you know the times when I'm most impacted by the riches I have in Christ? It's when I'm actively involved in sharing my faith in Christ with others. Can you relate?

And what does that indicate will happen if we are *not* sharing our faith with others? We'll grow stale and sour. We won't appreciate the good things we have in Christ. We'll complain and become disillusioned. We'll stop growing.

Dawson Trotman, the founder of the *Navigators*, said it well. "Spiritually speaking, we were born to reproduce." But if we're not doing that, we're in trouble.

Verse 6 offers a great pattern for successful Christian living. Do you want to prosper in your Christian life? Here's what it takes. Dig into the Word of God and grasp what you have in Christ. Then look for ways to share it with others. As you do, you'll discover even more resources that are yours!

The process never stops in this life. Philemon had great resources. He exhibited great faith and love. Yet Paul prayed that the sharing of his faith would become even more effectual—that was request number one—so that he would grasp every good thing he had in Christ—request number two.

What "good things in Christ" do we have? We could spend hours answering that question and not exhaust it, but it boils down to two bottom line benefits.

1. *In Christ we have everything we need to be right with God.* Everything. If we should stand at the gate of heaven and God should ask of us, "Why should I let you in?" the answer is not, "Because of the good things I've done in life," for our good deeds are as filthy rags in God's sight (Isa. 64:6). In the old hymn Toplady gives the answer...

*While I draw this fleeting breath, when my eyes shall close in death,
When I soar to worlds unknown, see Thee on Thy judgment throne,
Rock of Ages, cleft for me, Let me hide myself in Thee.* ^[5]

It's not Christ plus our works. It's Christ and Christ alone. It's the merit of His perfect life, His substitutionary death, and His victorious resurrection. In Christ we have everything we need to be right with God. But there's more!

2. *In Christ we have everything we need to be right with each other.* And that's why Paul is writing this

letter. There were two people, two friends of his, that were separated by the sins one had committed against the other. Grievous sins, penalty-deserving sins, relationship-breaking sins. But Paul sent the offender back to face the offended. Why did he do that? Because he knew that those two brothers in Christ had everything they needed to be right with each other, and so do we.

Which brings us to the final element of prayer. One, prayer should include the expression of thanks. Two, prayer should include the expression of requests. And...

III. Prayer should lead to action (7ff.).

What kind of action? The kind of Christ-honoring action that Paul next called on Philemon to demonstrate. In doing so, first of all...

A. Paul affirmed that his friend demonstrated love towards others. Verse 7—"Your love has given me great joy and encouragement, because you, brother, have refreshed the hearts of the saints." Philemon had a testimony, a good one, and Paul commended him for it. "You've shown love to me," the apostle acknowledged. "And you've shown love toward other saints, refreshing their hearts. And I appreciate that, my friend! But there's something I want to ask of you. Do it again. Demonstrate love yet again, this time to Onesimus."

Having affirmed Philemon...

B. Paul asked his friend to demonstrate love towards one particular problem person named Onesimus. Verses 8-11 "Therefore, 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. I then, as Paul—an old man and now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus—I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, who became my son while I was in chains. Formerly he was useless to you, but now he has become useful both to you and to me."^[6]

It's so easy to say we love humanity in general, yet it's quite another thing to love individual humans, particularly those who've hurt us. But that's the action to which Paul's prayer led.

I love Paul's statement in verse 18, "If he has done you any wrong or owes you anything, charge it to me."

Onesimus was a felon and his guilt could not be denied. Yet what did Paul ask Philemon to do? Pretend the sins never occurred? No. "Put that to my account," he says to Philemon. "I will take care of his debt."

What a great illustration of divine forgiveness! We owed a debt we could not pay. We had run away from God. We robbed Him of the glory He deserved. His justice demanded that we be punished.

But what did Jesus Christ do? He stepped into our shoes and said, "Put that to my account." And God did, as 2 Corinthians 5:21 declares, "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God."

Jesus Christ took care of our sin. Jesus Christ took care of our guilt. Jesus Christ took care of our penalty. Jesus Christ took care of our debt. In our behalf, He said, "Put that to my account."

When Jesus died on the cross, a transaction occurred. Theologically, that transaction is called imputation. Our sins were imputed to Him. His righteousness was imputed to us. Our debt was charged to His account. His riches were deposited to ours.

Martin Luther once said, "All of us are Onesimuses!"^[7] And he was right!

Onesimus wouldn't be the last person Christ would use one of His servants to reach inside a prison. He did it with David Winters, too. You've probably never heard of David Winters. You may recognize the name of Wendell Kempton, the former president of ABWE who went to be with the Lord earlier this year after a brief battle with cancer. Dr. Kempton was a mentor in my life and a dear friend of this church. He was also a dear friend of a prisoner in an Arizona penitentiary, a son of ABWE missionaries by the name of David Winters. I'll let David share his own prison story with us, taken from the Spring 2008 edition of *Message*:

I'm a forty-four-year-old MK who grew up in Japan, Michigan, and on the road. I've been in prison for over twenty years for robberies I committed to get money for drugs and the wild life. I first met Dr. Kempton in Japan around 1975. Since then, he repeatedly showed up in my life. Even when I was at a foster home in Tucson, Arizona, he tracked me down. When I was in the hospital, he showed up to be there for me. Later, when I was in jail, he again was there. He wanted to help. And then he kept coming back. He wouldn't quit asking. Two to three times a year, he'd visit me in prison, for twenty years.

My friendship with Dr. Kempton really began here in prison, and he showed me even when I was skeptical of him that he wanted to love me unconditionally with no judgment. He lived love in action until it got through my thick head and heart. He wasn't scared to reach out and love someone who really struggled with love. Because of him, I'm a different man today. You know, he lived as far as possible from me when our friendship started—New

Jersey, and he would come all the way to Arizona to see me! He knew statesmen, policemen, famous preachers, college presidents, famous sports athletes, and coaches. He had hundreds of families in ABWE and a large family of his own, and he'd still find time for me. He surely did not do this for any spotlight or recognition because there is none. Very few people know of me at all. Those who may, only know I'm someone Dr. Kempton went to see.

He's the most Christ-like man I've ever known. He was the fruits of the Spirit. He was to me what a true friend, a true parent, a true Christian man is supposed to be. He was to me what I wish I can be someday.

Most of all, I'll miss our time together. I just loved to talk and listen to him. I'd sacrifice eating or bathroom breaks so I could have a few more precious minutes to talk and listen to him. I will remember most how gentle, kind, genuine, and understanding he was. He had a way to make me feel like I was important and mattered. He told me he loved coming to see me. I saw he had true peace—secure, unshakable peace. We talked about that on his last visit, a visit that was early and a surprise, and now I know why. On December 14, I got to spend about three to four hours alone with him. It was a great visit. With his whole body ravaged with painful cancer, he took time to come and encourage me! We started talking about peace after talking about Hosea, and I asked him if he always had perfect peace in God. He immediately and calmly answered, "Yes."

[Then David wrote out this prayer...]

Lord God,

It's me again. Right now I could really use a little of that awesome peace that you filled Doc with, please. And however you taught him to make me feel like I mattered and was important—please teach me to have that gift, because it really touches people deep inside.

When I look back there are many great things I could say, but what describes Dr. Kempton to me is servanthood. He was Yours, all the time, in every way. He was completely surrendered.

I never met his wife or children. I have no idea what car he drove or the color of his house. I never saw him preach. I never saw him at the office or at home. But no one in this world has ever touched my heart and changed my life more than he did.

I've been a little lost since You called him home to rest, but I can't blame You. You'll really enjoy his company, and he'll adore Yours. In his memory, use me to help to serve You and to help someone else like he helped me.

Amen.

David Winters

A Blessed Friend of Dr. Kempton

Make It Personal: Ask yourself the following questions...

1. Do I have real faith? Be honest. Is your faith real?
2. Am I sharing my faith with others? That's the outcome of real faith. If you love Christ, you can't hoard Him. You want to find ways to share Him with others. Are you?
3. What demonstration of faith does God desire to see most in my life today? Perhaps there's a problem person in your life. Will you love that person so that others will see Christ through you?

**Note: This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church. It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

[1] Taken from O. Sanders, *Spiritual Leadership*, p. 130.

[2] Source unknown (taken from E. M. Bounds?)

[3] NKJV "that the sharing of your faith may become effective by the acknowledgment of every good thing which is in you in Christ Jesus." The *Young's Literal Translation*, "that the fellowship of thy faith may become working in the full knowledge of every good thing that is in you toward Christ Jesus."

ESV "And 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."

NLT "And I am praying that you will put into action the generosity that comes from your faith as you understand and experience all the good things we have in Christ."

[4] Here's how the NASB translates the verse, "And I pray that the fellowship of your faith may become effective through the knowledge of every good thing which is in you."

[5] Augustus Toplady, *Rock of Ages*

[6] Ironically, the name Onesimus means "useful." This once "useless" slave had now become "useful," all because of Christ.

[7] In Wiersbe, 270.