**Paul and Philemon**

Have you ever read the book of Philemon? It is such a short, yet wonderful book. It could hardly be called a book in the technical sense as it is no more than a page! You don’t believe it?! Well let’s read it together:

Philemon

“All Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, to Philemon our beloved and fellow laborer, to the sister Apphia, Archippus our fellow soldier, and to the church in your house: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. I thank my God, making mention of you always in my prayers, hearing of your love and faith which you have toward the Lord Jesus and toward all the saints, that the sharing of your faith may become effective by the acknowledgment of every good thing which is in you in Christ Jesus. For we have great joy and consolation in your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed by you, brother. Therefore, though I might be very bold in Christ to command you what is fitting, yet for love’s sake I rather appeal to you ——being such a one as Paul, the aged, and now also a prisoner of Jesus Christ—— I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, whom I have begotten while in my chains, who once was unprofitable to you, but now is profitable to you and to me. I am sending him back. You therefore receive him, that is, my own heart, whom I wished to keep with me, that on your behalf he might minister to me in the chains of the gospel. But without your consent I wanted to do nothing, that your good deed might not be by compulsion but voluntary. For perhaps he departed for a while for this purpose, that you might receive him forever, no 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. If then you count me as a partner, receive him as you would me. If he has wronged you or owes anything, put that on my account. I, Paul, am writing with my own hand. I will repay—not to mention to you that you owe me even your own self besides. Yes, brother, let me have joy from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in the Lord. Having confidence in your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say. But, meanwhile, also prepare a guest room for me, for I trust that through your prayers I shall be granted to you. Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, greets you, as do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, Luke, my fellow laborers. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Amen.”

This is the shortest of Paul’s letters and after the greetings, verse 10 gives us the main reason he wrote it. This reason was to “appeal”, to beseech, to beg Philemon, about Onesimus. We can infer from verse 16 that Onesimus was a slave of Philemon that for some reason had escaped from his master. Paul says “he had begotten Onesimus in his chains”. By this we can understand that Onesimus met with Paul when he was in prison and he became a believer. Now Onesimus was in his way back to his master and though it is not stated I tend to think that he himself carried this letter to Philemon.

Moving to what the letter says, what stroke me and which I want to point out is how Paul handled a potentially difficult situation: here is a servant that has run away from his master. He most probably owes money to him too. This master happens to be a wonderful Christian. The servant meets Paul and becomes a believer. At the same time he becomes very useful to Paul in serving him “in the chains of the gospel”. What does Paul do in such a situation? What would you do? Bring yourself in Paul’s position. After you do this bring yourself in Philemon’s
Now first of all, who was Paul? Paul was a wonderful servant of the Lord. He spread the gospel to the Gentiles as nobody else did in the first century. The churches didn’t know anybody else more than him. For most of the Gentile believers he was their “father” in the faith, the one that brought them to the truth. And this is also valid for both Onesimus and Philemon. Now this brother is in prison and Onesimus is ministering to him. He is very useful to him. The problem is that he is also a run away slave. His master is a brother in a church that Paul had planted.

How did Paul handle the situation with this Christian servant that was actually useful to him? The answer is with kindness, love and honesty. Speaking to Philemon, he wrote to him as a brother to brother. He says: “though I might be very bold in Christ to command you what is fitting, yet for love’s sake I rather appeal to you”. He had the boldness to command, but he didn’t. Instead he beseeched Philemon. He appealed to him. He begged him. For love’s sake. Paul didn’t exercise authority like a superior to his subjects. He didn’t manipulate either. Yes he is bold to command what is fitting but if he would do this it wouldn’t be for “love’s sake” and it is LOVE that matters. What he is doing, for love’s sake, because it is love that matters, is to appeal – not to command, dictate or manipulate.
Then he says something else: “I am sending him [Onesimus] back. You therefore receive him, that is, my own heart, whom I wished to keep with me, that on your behalf he might minister to me in the chains of the gospel. But without your consent I wanted to do nothing, that your good deed might not be by compulsion but voluntary.”

Paul could have kept Onesimus and just sent a letter to Philemon telling him that he is commanded to receive back Onesimus. Or he could have told him that he is commanded to forget Onesimus because Paul needs him now and for this reason he will keep him. Paul didn’t do this. He sent back Onesimus appealing to Philemon to receive him. Then he tells Philemon that he would like to keep Onesimus to minister to him in his chains of the gospel “on the behalf of Philemon”. Pay attention to this “on your behalf”. Paul is not saying “instead of you Philemon”. Onesimus was not to be a replacement of Philemon. If Onesimus returned to serve Paul, he would be there “on behalf of Philemon”, on “account of Philemon”, “for Philemon”. This needs to be emphasised because some translations have translated this as “in stead of you” and this is misleading. The Greek word that is translated as “on your behalf” here is the word huper (ὑπέρ) and it is used more than 120 times in the New Testament. In only two occasions is translated (by the KJV) as “in stead”. In 108 cases is translated “for”. And it should be translated as such here as well. Onesimus, if he returned to minister Paul would be “for Philemon”, “on behalf of Philemon”. It would be like Philemon had lent this servant to Paul. A brother one day gave me an interesting thought about giving and supporting. He said that when we support a particular ministry or purpose we become shareholders of that ministry and we will receive dividends from this. When you invest resources to a ministry and this ministry brings fruit then part of this is recorded as
dividend for you by God, because it was done through your support. If Philemon let Onesimus to serve Paul it would be an investment “for”, “on behalf of” Philemon and it would return dividends to him according to the fruit of Paul’s ministry! But there is also another point I want to make here. Though Paul needed Onesimus, he didn’t assume that he had the authority to keep him, just because let’s say he was the apostle Paul. Instead look what he said: “But without your consent I wanted to do nothing, that your good deed might not be by compulsion but voluntary.” Paul refrained from imparting coercion on Philemon. He made his situation clear: he was in prison and Onesimus was a help for him. Yet he wouldn’t keep him. He wouldn’t coerce Philemon on this. Philemon had to decide this on his own, voluntarily. See the kindness of Paul. He speaks as a brother to brother. Not like a superior (“in faith”) to a subordinate (“in faith”). “I need Onesimus brother Philemon. It will be a great investment to the ministry for you to give him to me to minister me in the chains of the gospel. But brother no way I would want you to do this as of compulsion. Only voluntarily. Take your time and do as you think best.”

Paul then moves on in his appeal about Onesimus, telling Philemon that though he left just a slave, now he returns something more. He returns as a dear brother in the Lord. But it may be that Onesimus when he left he owed money to Philemon. What would happen with these debts? Paul does not command Philemon to “write them off”. To “just forget them”, because “you know now you are brothers”. What Paul tells Philemon are not demands but appeals. And for the debts? Here is what he says: “If he owes you anything, put this on my account. I will repay!” This is brotherly love! It would not be brotherly love to coerce Philemon to forget about the debts that his old slave owed him. But it is love to say as Paul said: “Receive him back
brother. I’ll take care of his debts. I’ll pay you! Don’t worry about this.” This IS brotherly love. Paul tells Philemon that he owes him even himself! Philemon came to the faith through the work and labour of Paul. But he does not mention this to exercise coercion on him. It is a truth but he will not use this to settle material things.

Closing his appeal, Paul says “Having confidence in your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say.” Paul knew that Philemon was a true brother in Christ. Also in the beginning of the letter he calls him a beloved and fellow labourer, saying he has heard of his love and faith toward the Lord Jesus and towards all saints. Paul and Philemon were not two strangers. They knew each other. The appeal of Paul was not to a stranger but to a beloved brother and a fellow labourer known for his faithfulness. It was an appeal from one faithful brother to another faithful brother. And Paul is confident that Philemon not only will grand his appeal but he will even do more than this.

For me this letter from Paul is an example of how the first century Christians related to each other. Paul was sending back to Philemon, Onesimus a slave that had run away from him and most probably owed him money. Onesimus at sometime met Paul, became a believer and was very useful to him, ministering him in the chains of the gospel. However Paul didn’t think that this gave him the right to do something else than what would be the correct thing to do. I can imagine many Christians that would do differently than Paul today. Many that would claim (or try to get) a “revelation” from God on the matter to coerce Philemon into doing what they wanted him to do. Next time somebody coerces you and let you feel condemned if you don’t do what he wants you to do, please read Philemon! Next time that somebody will lay claim
on something because it is “for the work of the Lord”, coercing you to give for his purposes, please read Philemon. Next time that you desire something from a brother, please read Philemon on how to proceed. Paul knew what was needed here was not a special revelation from God on the matter but common sense, coupled with honesty and truth.

- To whom does Onesimus belong? To Philemon. He should therefore go back to Philemon.
- Onesimus owes money to Philemon. Somebody should pay it. Who will pay? Paul takes up this burden.
- Onesimus is useful to Paul in the work of the ministry. However, does this give Paul the right to keep him without asking Philemon? No! Onesimus needs first to go back to Philemon and only if Philemon, voluntary and not of compulsion, considers that he wants to send him back to Paul then he will come back.

See the respect of Paul towards Philemon. See the way he related to the brothers. Learn from this. Granted, in many occasions we are at crossroads and we need word of wisdom, God’s intervention to make the right choice. And God will give this to us if we ask him with faith (James 1:5-8). In many other occasions though all that we need – instead of over-spiritualising – is application of the truth we know with love and honesty.

Philippians 2:3
“Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself.”

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