

How To Be A Real Friend, *Part 5* A Study of Philemon 12, 18-19

Characteristic of Completeness: Love

Big Idea: Offer grace and truth.

Related Scriptures: Psalm 32:3-5; Proverbs 28:13; John 1:14, 17;

Romans 5:8; 12:18; 14:19; Ephesians 4:3; Hebrews 12:14; James 5:16

Introduction:

- A. This is the final message in a series titled, ► “How To Be A Real Friend.” All of the messages come from a study of the little Bible letter of ► Philemon.

- B. Let me take just a minute to review what we have learned. We have learned that the author of the letter is the ► apostle Paul, and he’s writing from prison in Rome. Paul is writing to his dear friend ► Philemon.
 - 1. Philemon was a man of considerable influence and social standing. A church in Colossae met at his home, and he was a devoted follower of Jesus, who was led to Christ by Paul himself.
 - 2. Philemon owned a slave ► named Onesimus. Onesimus had run away from Philemon, his master, and Onesimus owed Philemon some money.

In his flight, Onesimus somehow ► met Paul. Paul led Onesimus to Christ, and at some point, Onesimus apparently told Paul that he was a runaway slave. So, Paul sent Onesimus ► back to his owner with this letter that we have preserved for us in the Bible.

- C. We have discovered so far that to be a real friend is first to ► offer encouragement. Second, it is to ► offer respect. Third, it is to ► offer salvation. Fourth it is to ► offer perspective. Now ► this morning, I want you to see that to be a real friend is to ► offer grace and truth. That’s the big idea of my sermon: Offer grace and truth.

Let’s discover how Paul offered grace and truth to his friend Onesimus.

- I. ► First, let’s consider how Paul offered ► truth to Onesimus.

- A. In ► Verse 12, Paul writes to Philemon about Onesimus, saying,

^{NIV} Philemon 12 I am sending him—who is my very heart—back to you.

What does this have to do with Paul offering the truth to Onesimus?

- 1. Well, I want you to notice who is doing the sending here. Paul says, ► “I am

sending” Onesimus. Paul is doing the sending, suggesting that it was Paul who encouraged Onesimus to return. Clearly, Onesimus returned willingly; otherwise, we would not have the letter preserved for us. But, it seems that Paul initiated the return.

2. Why? Why did Paul encourage Onesimus to return? Onesimus had run away from his master, Philemon, and before he ran, Onesimus ripped off Philemon. This is apparent in Philemon ► 18, where Paul writes to Philemon,

^{NIV} Philemon 18 If he has done you any wrong or owes you anything, charge it to me.

Although it’s not readily apparent in English, in the original Greek, this is a polite way of acknowledging that Onesimus has indeed done Philemon wrong and owes him money. The phrase translated, “If he has done you any wrong or owes you anything” is something called a first-class condition, and it’s usually assumed to be true. So, there’s no real “if” about it. It would normally be understood by Philemon as saying, “Since Onesimus *has* done you wrong and owes you . . .” The wrong *has* occurred.

So, Paul offered Onesimus the truth in telling him that he should go back and make things right with Philemon. That’s the truth.

3. ► Why does Onesimus need to return and make things right? There are at least two reasons:

- a. First, Onesimus and Philemon are now brothers in Christ and God calls us to be reconciled, to work things out, to confess and seek forgiveness from one another. This is very clear from a number of Bible passages.

► Romans 12:18 says,

^{NIV} Romans 12:18 If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.

► Romans 14:19 says,

^{NIV} Romans 14:19 Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification.

► Ephesians 4:3 says,

^{NIV} Ephesians 4:3 Make every effort to keep the unity of the

Spirit through the bond of peace.

► Hebrews 12:14 says,

^{NIV} Hebrews 12:14 Make every effort to live in peace with all men . . .

► James 5:16 says,

^{NIV} James 5:16 Therefore confess your sins to each other . . .

The truth is clear, and Paul tells it like it is: Onesimus needs to make things right with Philemon. He needs to confess and seek forgiveness.

- b. ► This is not only the right thing to do, but the truth is, it is also the most beneficial thing for Onesimus to do in the long run. You see, guilt is not a friendly companion. Trying to cover up your own sin eats you up inside. As an expert in the Old Testament, Paul would have been thoroughly familiar with this idea.

In ► Psalm 32:3-5, David explains the effects of trying to cover up his own wrongdoing. He says,

^{NIV} Psalm 32:3 When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. 4 For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was sapped as in the heat of summer. 5 Then I acknowledged my sin to you and did not cover up my iniquity.

► Proverbs 28:13 says,

^{NIV} Proverbs 28:13 He who conceals his sins does not prosper, but whoever confesses and renounces them finds mercy.

Paul knows the truth, and he offers it to his friend Onesimus in sending him back to make things right with Philemon.

- B. ► I want to try to give some idea of how hard it must have been for Paul to offer the truth to Onesimus. A number of things would have made it very difficult for Paul to offer the truth and send Onesimus back.
1. First, I think Paul would have preferred to keep Onesimus around. It would have been easier for Paul if Onesimus had stayed.

In ► Verse 13, Paul writes to Philemon,

^{NIV} Philemon 13 I would have liked to keep him with me so that he could take your place in helping me while I am in chains for the gospel.

You see, Paul had led Onesimus to Christ. And, it seems that Onesimus had grown to be very helpful to Paul. And, Paul needed help. At the time he wrote Philemon, he was probably in his 60's and confined to prison. He was completely dependent on those on the outside to provide him help.

2. ► Paul had not only grown to depend on the help of Onesimus, he had also grown to love him as his own son in the Lord. In ► Verse 12, Paul says,

^{NIV} Philemon 12 I am sending him—who is my very heart—back to you.

Paul felt like he was sending his very heart when he sent Onesimus away.

3. ► It was also difficult for Paul to offer the truth because sending Onesimus away was a considerable risk. One Bible scholar explains the risk:

Now no one knew better than Paul how great a risk he was taking. Remember the position of the slaves. A slave was not a person; he was a living tool. Any master had the right of life and death over his slaves. The master had absolute power over his slaves. . . .

. . . A rebellious slave was promptly eliminated. And, if a slave ran away, at best he would be branded with a red-hot iron on the forehead, with the letter F--standing for fugitivus, which means runaway--and at the worst he would be crucified and would die a torturing death. Paul well knew all this, and he knew that slavery was so ingrained into the ancient world that even to send Onesimus back to the Christian Philemon was a considerable risk.¹

Nevertheless, Paul was willing to tell his friend the truth even when it was very difficult to do so. That's what a real friend does. A real friend offers the truth, even when it's tough.

- C. Ron Bronski reminds me of Onesimus. In the 1970s, Ron Bronski was second-in-command of the Belaires, a gang that terrorized sections of northwest Chicago. The Chicago police described him as a "sociopath" and human "garbage." He was

¹ William Barclay, 310-312.

dangerous, violent, and a heavy drug user. He had a hair-trigger temper, and a lengthy criminal record. There was a warrant for his arrest for shooting a rival gang member in the back. So, he ran away to Portland, Oregon.

In Portland, Ron ran into some Christians who led him to Christ. Ron Bronski became a devout follower of Jesus and abandoned his life of crime. Then his new Christian friends helped him face a difficult truth: Ron Bronski had been reconciled with God, but not with society. The right thing for Ron to do was to return to Chicago and turn himself in. And that's what Ron did. Ron's pastor in Portland explained the situation to a reporter covering the story in the Chicago Tribune:

Ron is one of the most beautiful, loving people I know. He's totally committed to Christ. We pray together several times week, and he's always doing things like visiting the sick and praying with them, and using his street knowledge to preach to troubled kids. . . . He knew there was still a warrant out for his arrest, so he saved his money and took the train to Chicago to turn himself in.

Over twenty years later, Ron Bronski became a minister to street kids in the inner city of Portland. He has a clear conscience and a powerful witness because some friends offered him the truth.²

- II. The offering of truth is important, but it must be balanced. All truth and nothing but the truth can be cold and harsh. It must be balanced with the ► second thing: ► Grace.
 - A. Truth and grace often come as a pair in the Bible. In fact, I think the two words—grace and truth—sum up pretty well the love Jesus showed to His friends. Offering grace and truth is a way of loving friends well. So ► Love is our Characteristic of Completeness for the week. We can be a real friend by offering a full balance of both grace and truth.

► John 1:14 describes Jesus as “the Word” in saying,

^{NIV} John 1:14 The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of ► grace and truth.

There is our pair: grace and truth. Jesus loves with grace and truth. ► John 1:17 also says,

^{NIV} John 1:17 For the law was given through Moses; ► grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.

There is our pair once again: grace and truth. Jesus loves with grace and truth.

² Lee Strobel, *The Case for Faith*, 311-315.

- B. ► What is grace? ► Grace is undeserved favor and unmerited love. It is the free gift of love and caring and help that is unearned by the recipient. Jesus Christ is the embodiment of truth and grace. It's reflected in ► Romans 5:8, which says,

^{NIV} Romans 5:8 But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

The ► truth here is that we are all sinners in desperate need of a savior. Apart from Jesus Christ, we are hopelessly incapable of saving ourselves. We cannot work our way to heaven. We cannot have a right relationship with God. That's the difficult truth.

But, the ► grace is that Christ died for us. Jesus offers grace. Christ paid for our sins when we did not deserve it. Christ makes it possible to have a right relationship with God again. We don't earn it. We simply receive it by trusting Christ alone as our Savior from sin. Jesus offers grace.

"Well," you say, "I can see how Christ, the Son of God offers grace, but how do more normal people offer grace to friends?"

- C. ► Let's look at how Paul offers grace to Onesimus.

1. Remember, the truth is that Onesimus has wronged Philemon. And, Paul tells Onesimus the difficult truth that Onesimus needs to return and make things right with Philemon. That's the difficult truth.
2. But, Paul adds grace to truth. In effect he says, "Onesimus, this is the right thing and the hard thing you need to do, but I'm going to do everything I can to help you do the right thing. In order to make this thing right, I'm going to help you do what you can't do on your own."

How does Paul help? Paul writes to Philemon in ► Verses 18-19, saying,

^{NIV} Philemon 18 If he has done you any wrong or owes you anything, charge it to me. 19 I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand. I will pay it back . . .

In effect, Paul says "I'll pay for whatever Onesimus has cost you." That's grace. When Paul says, "I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand. I will pay it back" he is basically sending a signed promissory note, guaranteeing repayment of anything Onesimus owes.

3. How is Paul going to pay this debt? We don't know for sure, but most likely Paul intended to repay the debt through his own labor in service to

Philemon.³ This is plausible in that Paul intended to travel to Colossae, where Philemon lived. In Philemon ► 22, Paul says,

^{NIV} Philemon 22 And one thing more: Prepare a guest room for me, because I hope to be restored to you in answer to your prayers.

Perhaps Paul intended to work off the debt by taking the place of Onesimus for a time.

Regardless of how Paul intended to pay the debt, his offer of grace is remarkable. Paul offered to enter into the problem of Onesimus and help him out of it at considerable cost to himself.

D. How ► can we love our friends in a way that offers both grace and truth?

1. First, I think it is good to recognize that balance is needed. And balancing grace and truth is challenging and rare. Consider cases of extreme imbalance.

For example, all grace and no truth makes permissive parents who spoil their children and invite rebellion. All grace and no truth makes enabling and perhaps even codependent spouses. All grace and no truth makes spineless bosses who coddle the slackers, while frustrating and discouraging their best workers. All grace and no truth makes cowardly, enabling friends who never get past superficiality because they're too afraid of healthy conflict.

On the other hand, all truth and no grace makes authoritarian parents who exasperate their children and invite rebellion. All truth and no grace make spouses like dragons and not safe havens. All truth and no grace makes fearful bosses who force their employees to play it safe at the expense of excellence. All truth and no grace makes legalistic, judgmental friends who are to be avoided.

³ Other alternatives have been offered. Perhaps, Paul simply expected Philemon to reduce the amount Philemon owed to him. Paul tacks on this final clause to Verse 19: “. . . not to mention that you owe me your very self.” Maybe Paul is saying something like, “deduct it from what you owe me.” Maybe. But, to me, this seems to be the least plausible alternative because Philemon owes Paul a kind of spiritual debt for Paul leading him to Christ. But, Onesimus owes Philemon a monetary debt that Paul is promising to pay. It's an apples-and-oranges situation. They're different debts.

Another option is that perhaps Paul had the money to pay the debt. Paul's imprisonment in Rome during this time was perhaps not what you think. Paul was in the custody of a Roman soldier, apparently chained to the soldier. But, Paul lived in his own rented living quarters, with the guard. Acts 28 describes the situation. Verse 16 says, “When we entered Rome, Paul was allowed to stay by himself, with the soldier who was guarding him. Verse 30 says, “Acts 28:30 For two whole years Paul stayed there in his own rented house and welcomed all who came to see him.” Paul was renting a house in Rome. He was apparently confined to the house, but anyone could come and see him freely. But, the point relevant to our discussion is this: If he had enough money to rent the house, perhaps he had enough to pay the debt owed to Philemon.

So, a balance of grace and truth is sorely needed. A real friend can be both on my side *and* in my face. A real friend will give me the shirt off his back *and* give me what for. Because a real friend wants to spur me on to love and good deeds.⁴ A real friend wants the best for me, and that requires grace *and* truth. The friend we have in Jesus says, “I forgive you,” *and* “sin no more.”

2. When I was 17, I wrecked my father’s pickup truck. I was coasting recklessly down Mt. Lemmon outside of Tucson when I slid into an oncoming vehicle. There were no injuries, except to the side of my dad’s truck and to the other vehicle.

I felt so badly about it. I was scared. I was ashamed. I was contrite. I was apologetic. I was repentant.

My father told me the truth about how I had endangered lives and disappointed him. My dad was a mechanic and he owned a garage, so he made me repair the truck myself, which, for me, was a consequence that fit the crime perfectly.

After I repaired the truck, I had to appear before a Juvenile Court Judge, who would decide the fate of my driver’s license.

Dad went with me. On the way, he didn’t chew me out. I didn’t get a lecture. He didn’t tell me how inconvenient it was for him to take off work to be with me, although I knew it was. You see, dad had already told me the truth about what I had done and what I needed to do. Now, he was just coming along beside me to help me face the music. He wasn’t there to rub my nose in my own foolishness. He was there to help me do the right thing. Dad offered grace. Grace and truth.

3. Years ago, I was sitting in my seminary class on Christian Ethics. The professor introduced a guest speaker who for most of his adult life had led a homosexual lifestyle. He had been out of the gay lifestyle for about five years when he spoke to us. He had AIDS, and he was there to tell us what it was like to grow up in a church-going household and to struggle with homosexuality.

He said that he always knew in his heart that his homosexual lifestyle was wrong. The truth was not missing. But grace was missing. He said that he felt that there was no one in the church who would help him overcome what he knew was a problem. There was only contempt and condemnation. “So,” he said, “I turned away from the church and I ended up going to gay bars.” Why? He said he found more grace and acceptance in gay bars than in the church. He wasn’t asking us to tolerate homosexuality, or to count it an

⁴ Hebrew 10:24.

acceptable lifestyle; he was asking us to offer grace to homosexuals who need our help. A friend offers grace. Grace and truth.

4. This week, perhaps you could prayerfully ask God the extent to which you are offering grace and truth in your relationships. Is there an imbalance? Is more grace needed? More truth?

Perhaps you could even go to a friend or two and ask them what they think about the balance of grace and truth you've been offering to them. Is there an imbalance? Is more grace needed? More truth?

Because a real friend offers grace and truth.

Conclusion:

This concludes our study of Philemon. Some of you have asked me, "Whatever happened with Philemon. Did he do what Paul asked him to?" And, "Whatever became of Onesimus."

The Bible is silent on these questions, but early church history gives us some clues. The clues provide an example of the powerful potential of offering truth and grace to a friend.

- A. Did Philemon do what Paul asked him to? Did he treat Onesimus as a brother? Did he give Onesimus his freedom and send him back to help Paul? The answer to all these questions is probably yes, but we can't be certain. Philemon probably did do what Paul requested; otherwise, Philemon would have had no motivation to preserve this letter we have in our Bibles.⁵
- B. What about Onesimus? Some fifty years after the writing of Philemon, a devout Christian man by the name of Ignatius was being brought to Rome to be executed for his faith in Christ. Along the way he wrote letters to churches encouraging them to follow Christ. One of the letters—which we still have today—was sent to the church at Ephesus. In the letter, Ignatius speaks highly of the bishop or leader of the church at Ephesus. He describes him ► as . . .

. . . a man of inexpressible love, and who is your bishop, whom I pray you by Jesus Christ to love, and that you would all seek to be like him. Blessed by God, who has granted unto you, who are yourselves so excellent, to obtain such an excellent bishop.

Who is this great leader in the church? Ignatius says his name is Onesimus. Could this be the same Onesimus? Could it be that the truth and grace offered to Onesimus

⁵ Bible scholars D.A. Carson, Douglas Moo, and Leon Morris explain it this way: *Did Philemon respond as Paul wished? We may safely assume that he did. Otherwise he would surely have suppressed the letter, and we would know nothing about it (An Introduction to the New Testament, 388-389).*

years earlier helped him to become a godly man? I like to think so.

- C. ► There is another angle to this story that is remarkable. Around the turn of the first century, the first collection of the apostle Paul's letters was assembled and published in the city of Ephesus for use by the church. Who was the leader of the Ephesian church at that time? Onesimus. If this is our Onesimus, the runaway slave, then he had a hand in pulling together the letters of Paul that would eventually be a part of our Bible!

Some scholars have wondered why the little letter to Philemon survived. It is short. It is highly personal. It deals directly with no great doctrine. It confronts no great heresy. Why did it survive? Could it be that Onesimus, bishop of Ephesus, was moved by God to insist that it be included? Could it be that the little letter to Philemon was included in the collection so that we might know how grace and truth changed his life forever? I like to think so.