

Philemon 1-7— What True Koinonia Or Fellowship With God And Man Looks Like

Memory Verse:

Philemon 18 NKJV

But if he has wronged you or owes anything, put that on my account.

Introduction:

Paul is a prisoner in Rome for two years, awaiting his trial before Caesar (that we now know that he won, having being acquitted and set free to continue serving as a missionary). While there, Philemon's runaway slave Onesimus meets Paul, is saved, and then starts working with Paul as a co-labourer for the Gospel. However, Onesimus has most likely stolen from Philemon and is also guilty as a runaway slave—things must be put right.

Here Paul demonstrates God's grace. Paul does the unthinkable for that day by encouraging Philemon to look at Onesimus as a brother in Christ instead of a slave—he wants Philemon to give Onesimus his freedom so Onesimus can go back to Rome and continue to work with Paul. To make this possible, Paul willingly offers to take any punishment due to Onesimus and pay all of his debt (But if he has wronged you or owes anything, put that on my account—Philemon 18).

This is what Jesus does for us as He stands between us and God: the only difference being that Jesus paid a much greater debt, a debt that no other man could pay—it cost Him His very own perfect life. There is no more powerful outworking or demonstration of the gospel of grace than this example of Paul in a practical way becoming Onesimus's saviour, simultaneously paying his debt and securing his freedom from slavery.

Outline:

1. Paul's greeting to Philemon and his family (vs 1-3)
2. What true *Koinonia* or fellowship with God and man looks like (vs 4-7)
3. Conclusion and Application: A common source of disharmony—taking offence causes a fence, and leads to contempt (a root of bitterness)

Philemon 1-25 NKJV

Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, to Philemon our beloved friend and fellow labourer, ² to the beloved Apphia, Archippus our fellow soldier, and to the church in your house:

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

⁴ I thank my God, making mention of you always in my prayers, ⁵ hearing of your love and faith which you have toward the Lord Jesus and toward all the saints, ⁶ that the sharing of your faith may become effective by the acknowledgment of every good thing which is in you in Christ Jesus. ⁷ For we have great joy and consolation in your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed by you, brother.

⁸ Therefore, though I might be very bold in Christ to command you what is fitting, ⁹ 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—¹⁰ I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, whom I have begotten while in my chains, ¹¹ who once was unprofitable to you, but now is profitable to you and to me.

¹² I am sending him back. You therefore receive him, that is, my own heart, ¹³ whom I wished to keep with me, that on your behalf he might minister to me in my chains for the gospel. ¹⁴ But without your consent I wanted to do nothing, that your good deed might not be by compulsion, as it were, but voluntary.

¹⁵ For perhaps he departed for a while for this purpose, that you might receive him forever, ¹⁶ 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.

¹⁷ If then you count me as a partner, receive him as you would me. ¹⁸ But if he has wronged you or owes anything, put that on my account. ¹⁹ 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. ²⁰ Yes, brother, let me have joy from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in the Lord.

²¹ Having confidence in your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say. ²² But, meanwhile, also prepare a guest room for me, for I trust that through your prayers I shall be granted to you.

²³ Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, greets you, ²⁴ as do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, Luke, my fellow labourers.

²⁵ The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Amen.

1. Paul's greeting to Philemon and his family

Philemon 1-3 NKJV

Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, to Philemon our beloved friend and fellow labourer, ² to the beloved Apphia, Archippus our fellow soldier, and to the church in your house:

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

v 1 **Paul, a prisoner:** Philemon was written by Paul during his Roman imprisonment described in Acts 28:30–31. Paul was arrested in Jerusalem (Acts 21:26-40), as predicted by the prophet Agabus in Acts 21:10-14. He spent two years in Caesarea Philippi and eventually appealed to Caesar in Rome, where he had to wait another two years for his trial (he was acquitted this first time).

Acts 28:30-31 NKJV—*Paul imprisonment in Rome while awaiting trial before Caesar*
Then Paul dwelt two whole years in his own rented house, and received all who came to him, ³¹ preaching the kingdom of God and teaching the things which concern the Lord Jesus Christ **with all confidence, no one forbidding him.**

v 2 **A prisoner of Christ Jesus:** Paul always saw beyond his circumstances to what God was doing. *Remember, if God is always good and He always loves me, and if God is always all-powerful and always in control, then what's happening to me is always a part of God's good plan for my life and I can and should always rejoice (see Romans 8:28-29).*

Paul was not a prisoner of Rome, because Rome had no authority to hold Paul. Paul was under God's command or authority (see John 19:11— *Jesus answered, "You could have no power at all against Me unless it had been given you from above."*). Paul was only shackled to a soldier for two years because God wanted him there—Paul had a free of charge, government provided, 24x7 security detail—no persecution or fear of threats or intimidation by the Jews (**with all confidence, no one forbidding him— Acts 28:31**).

Paul's imprisonment (literally a house arrest) had a powerful effect on the soldiers who guarded Paul, literally chained to him. **"But I want you to know, brethren, that the things which happened to me have actually turned out for the furtherance of the gospel, ¹³ so that it has become evident to the whole palace guard, and to all the rest, that my chains are in Christ; ¹⁴ and most of the brethren in the Lord, having become confident by my chains, are much more bold to speak the word without fear"** (Philippians 1:12-14 NKJV).

Another benefit of Paul's imprisonment in Rome was that he had to communicate by letter. Therefore, we have four epistles or letters to the churches—Philippians, Philemon, Ephesians, and Colossians all written during this time. If Paul had been able to speak to them personally, then we would never have benefitted from what he said to them.

Application: When we find ourselves in difficult situations not of our own making, we should be grateful for the opportunity that God is giving us, and not complain concerning our trial, but rather rejoice in it, knowing that much good will come from it, even if we can't see it at the time.

v 1 **And Timothy our brother:** Timothy was serving with Paul at the time. Timothy was a very important and godly pastor who worked with and under Paul.

v 1 **To Philemon our beloved friend and fellow labourer:** The main recipient is Philemon. This is the only place in the Bible where he is mentioned. What do we know about him?

- he most likely lived in the city of Colossae (now a part of Turkey)
- he was a beloved friend and fellow labourer or worker with Paul
- Apphia was probably his wife (v 2)
- Archippus was probably his son (v 2)
- he was the pastor of the church in his house (v 2)
- he owned at least one slave (common in those days)
- he had a guest room in his house where Paul would stay when passing through (v 22)
- he loved the church and its people and served them wholeheartedly (vs 5, 7)
- he **shared (*koinonia*) his faith** meaning that he was in fellowship with both God and man (v 6)

v 2 **To the beloved Apphia:** **"Apphia** was probably the wife of Philemon, and **Archippus** was probably his son. This address to family members is unique among the letters of Paul, but it makes sense considering the content of the letter to Philemon. In this letter Paul will appeal to Philemon regarding a runaway slave who has met Jesus and found refuge with Paul. In the customs of that day, Philemon's wife **Apphia** was the supervisor of the slaves in the household, so the letter concerned her also. (David Guzik)

v 2 **To the church in your house:** In New Testament times the church met in people's houses. Church history shows that there were no known dedicated church buildings or property until the third century.

"Up to the third century we have no certain evidence of the existence of church buildings for the purpose of worship; all references point to private houses for this. In Rome several of the oldest churches appear to have been built on the sites of houses used for Christian worship." (Oesterley)

At least a portion of the church in Colosse met in the house of Philemon. There would have been other house churches as well, with a city bishop overseeing the various house churches (like Titus was given oversight of the churches on the island of Crete, and Timothy in Ephesus). Romans 16:5 and Colossians 4:15 also mention house churches.

Application:

"Spurgeon points out that apparently, Philemon had a church that met in his house. This suggests to believers that *their* homes should also be a church, and that each home can have the characteristics of a healthy church:

- Consisting of converted, saved people
- Worshipping together
- Together having a bond of unity
- Supplied with oversight
- Teaching always present
- With a heart to minister to those on the outside" (David Guzik)

v 3 **Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ:** This is Paul's normal greeting. Remember, there can be no peace with God until a person has understood and received God's grace.

2. Philemon's love and faith

Philemon 4-7 NKJV

I thank my God, making mention of you always in my prayers, ⁵ hearing of your love and faith which you have toward the Lord Jesus and toward all the saints, ⁶ that the sharing of your faith may become effective by the acknowledgment of every good thing which is in you in Christ Jesus. ⁷ For we have great joy and consolation in your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed by you, brother.

v 4 **I thank my God, making mention of you always in my prayers:** Because of Philemon's *koinonia* or fellowship, was a great blessing to Paul, as we will see, and this caused Paul to often give thanks to God for him as he prayed to God. Paul also makes mention of (prays for) the Romans (Romans 1:9), the Ephesians (Ephesians 1:16), and the Thessalonians (1 Thessalonians 1:2).

v 4 **Making mention:** Paul's prayers for others were not long winded, but they were frequent. *This speaks of an attitude of prayer, where whenever we think about someone, we instinctively pray for them—this does not come naturally, it must be deliberately and purposefully nurtured and cultivated.*

Paul cared deeply for all the churches, and he prayed for them constantly, "besides the other things, what comes upon me daily: my deep concern for all the churches" (2 Corinthians 11:28). Paul didn't have time to pray long prayers for each person and church, but as they came to mind, and/or he went through his prayer list, he would make mention of them to God. In the following verses we have some of the specific prayers that Paul prayed for Philemon, and probably others as well.

v 5 **Hearing of your love and faith which you have toward the Lord Jesus and toward all the saints:** Notice that Philemon's love was first of all towards Jesus, then the saints. This is the only way it can work: God must be the source of our love, "*Dear friends, since God loved us that much, we surely ought to love each other. ¹² No one has ever seen God. But if we love each other, God lives in us, and his love is brought to full expression in us*"—1 John 4:11-12. If we truly love God then our love for others will be a natural overflow of the appreciation of love that God has for us.

v 5 **The saints:** Any true believer in Christ is a saint. This is the biblical definition of a saint—all believers are perfect in Christ, having been accounted with His righteousness (see 2 Corinthians 5:21).

v 6 **That the sharing of your faith may become effective:** Paul prayed for Philemon that the sharing (*koinonia*) of his faith would be effective.

How does the sharing of our faith become effective?

v 6 **By the acknowledgment of every good thing which is in you in Christ Jesus:** How does the sharing of our faith become effective? Only by recognizing that every good thing within us comes from Christ Jesus. Remember that there is nothing good about our old nature, and there is nothing bad about our new nature. This is yet another way of saying that if we are to have these **good things** in our lives (in this case Philemon's love for and fellowship with the saints—the fruit of the Spirit), then we need to be submitted to and relying on the power of the Holy Spirit. We also need to humbly acknowledge that any change for the better in our lives was produced by God.

Galatians 5:22 NLT

But the Holy Spirit produces this kind of fruit in our lives: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³ gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against these things!

v 6 **Sharing (koinonia):** The ancient Greek word *koinonia* means: fellowship, participation, communion, close association, partnership, sharing, willing contribution, and companion. It can express itself through both spiritual (prayer, counselling, friendship, teaching etc), and practical means (including serving and helping others and the giving and sharing of goods and money—see 2 Corinthians 8:4; 9:13; Romans 15:6).

The same word (*koinonia*) is translated "**as a partner**" in verse 17. "*If then you count me as a partner (if you have fellowship with me, if you are one with me), receive him as you would me*".

v 6 **The sharing of your faith:** The context of “**the sharing (*koinonia* or fellowship) of your faith**” is Philemon’s willing generosity towards, close association with, and willing partnership with other believers—this is what it looks like when Christians sacrificially or *agape* love each other—this was the secret to the success of the early church in Jerusalem.

Acts 2:44-47 NKJV

Now all who believed were together, and had all things in common, ⁴⁵ and sold their possessions and goods, and divided them among all, as anyone had need.

⁴⁶ So continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart, ⁴⁷ praising God and having favour with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved.

Paul himself was one of the recipients of Philemon’s *koinonia*, both in Philemon’s loving attitude towards Paul, and also the way he met Paul’s practical needs (see v 22).

Application for “the sharing of your faith”:

Effective evangelism has its roots in first of all understanding God’s love for us, because only then our motive is to share God’s love with others, and not just to convert people to what we believe because we think that we are right. The JW’s, Mormons, Muslims etc all share their faith, but it’s not for love, but rather out of obligation, pride, or self-seeking. These people are not saved, they don’t have the love of God in them, and so they seek to win souls to expand their own religion (pride), or for their own personal benefit (if I do this then I’ll get rewarded), or out of duty or obligation (e.g. I am required to knock on at least 50 doors each week)—whatever their motive, it’s not for love, and they are not seeking the welfare of the other person. This is loveless or ineffective evangelism.

We must be in partnership or fellowship (*koinonia*) with God first before we can be effective in sharing our faith with others. Why? Because otherwise we won’t be motivated by love for the other person, and the unbeliever can tell if you genuinely care for them or not.

v 7 **For we have great joy and consolation in your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed by you, brother:** Because Philemon demonstrated his love for God by willingly meeting the spiritual and physical needs of other believers (**because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed by you, brother**), Paul experienced **great joy and consolation**.

This is a fact: when we become conduits of God’s love, when we are submitted to and dependent on the power of the Holy Spirit, we encourage and uplift others and there is healing and strengthening of relationships, encouragement, joy, and genuine love for others. However, the opposite is also true: If I am operating in the flesh, then I will be causing pain and relationships will suffer, even if I am trying my own personal hardest to be a good Christian and do what the Bible says I am to do (as a parent, spouse, friend, worker etc). Remember, it’s not so much what you do, but why you do it that’s really important. Anything done with the wrong motive will receive no reward before Jesus at the Bema Seat Judgement (see 2 Corinthians 5:10)

James 3:13-18 NLT

If you are wise and understand God's ways (living by the power of the Spirit), prove it by living an honourable life, doing good works with the humility that comes from wisdom (meaning God's wisdom, God's ways, and God's power produced by the Holy Spirit). ¹⁴ But if you are bitterly jealous and there is selfish ambition in your heart, don't cover up the truth with boasting and lying (don't pretend to be walking with God when you are not). ¹⁵ For jealousy and selfishness are not God's kind of wisdom. Such things are earthly, unspiritual, and demonic. ¹⁶ For wherever there is jealousy and selfish ambition, there you will find disorder and evil of every kind. ¹⁷ **But the wisdom from above is first of all pure. It is also peace loving, gentle at all times, and willing to yield to others. It is full of mercy and the fruit of good deeds. It shows no favouritism and is always sincere.** ¹⁸ **And those who are peacemakers will plant seeds of peace and reap a harvest of righteousness.**

It all starts with at least two people first being in partnership or *koinonia* with God—only then can those two people maintain and experience the oneness or unity that God has already provided.

**Conclusion and Application: A common source of disharmony—
taking offence causes a fence, and leads to contempt (a root of
bitterness)**

Hebrews 12:15 NKJV

Looking carefully lest anyone fall short of the grace of God; lest any root of bitterness springing up cause trouble, and by this many become defiled.

Colossians 3:19 NKJV

Husbands, love your wives and do not be bitter toward them.

Living God's way, in blessed *koinonia* (partnership or fellowship) with others can only be done by being filled or empowered by the Spirit to put into effect the new nature (see Ephesians 5:18), otherwise we are living according to the old nature.

Romans 8:5-6 NLT

Those who are dominated by the sinful nature think about sinful things, but those who are controlled by the Holy Spirit think about things that please the Spirit. ⁶ So letting your sinful nature control your mind leads to death. But letting the Spirit control your mind leads to life and peace.

Analogy of living by offence or by grace:

Consider that when someone does something that we disagree with or is hurtful to us that there are two ways to respond, *and these ways become habits*. First there is the sinful human nature way, which is to take offence, and start to build up a grudge against the other person. Over time these grudges or offences build up into a wall or fence—**many offences will become a fence, and the relationship is essentially estranged**—there is a total separation at the personal or soul and spirit level.

Things can become so bad that an attitude of contempt sets in, described in the Scriptures as a root of bitterness. This means that we look down on the other person and can think nothing good towards them and see no good in them—nothing they do will ever be good enough.

Ephesians 4:29-32 NKJV

Let no corrupt word proceed out of your mouth, but what is good for necessary edification, that it may impart grace to the hearers. ³⁰ And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. ³¹ Let all bitterness, wrath, anger, clamour, and evil speaking be put away from you, with all malice (the fruit of the sinful human nature) ³² **And be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God in Christ forgave you (the fruit of or produced by the Holy Spirit—God’s wisdom from above—see James 3:13-18).**

This root of bitterness will effectively sabotage any effort for reconciliation and healing in relationships. There is only one way to deal with this deep seated resentment towards someone, and that is forgiveness. Only when we are willing to pray and ask God to reveal our hearts to us will know what is really there (see Psalm 139:23-24), and only when we are willing to do some real “soul searching” and humbly seek to forgive the other person will there be true reconciliation.

Remember that this root of bitterness is a weed that only God can pull out. We will not be able to live according to or by the power of the Spirit if there is this poison of accumulated unforgiveness left unchecked in our hearts—we must seek God’s help to forgive the other person, remaining soft towards them by showing them kindness, mercy and forgiveness.

Psalm 139:23-24 NKJV

Search me, O God, and know my heart; try me, and know my anxieties; ²⁴ and see if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.

We must all take the time to check our own hearts and see if there is a root of bitterness in our own hearts. If we are not experiencing the unity or fellowship (*koinonia*) that God has already given us, it simply means that we are not walking in the Spirit. Many times this is simply because we have chosen to not forgive, and have instead hardened our hearts to the other person. James gives us the solution in the following verse.

James 5:16 NKJV

Confess your trespasses to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much.