

# ENERGIZED FAITH

PHILEMON 1-7

**Christian Living Is All About Living For Christ.**

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# Energized Faith

Philemon 1-7

My original intent was to simply preach through the book of Colossians. However, it occurred to me that the book of Philemon is intimately connected to Colossians. Many of the people mentioned in Colossians appear again in the book of Philemon. And in fact, the context of the book of Philemon takes place in the city of Colosse. It may even be the case that Tychicus and Onesimus delivered both letters at the same time.

Many modern day readers accuse Paul of being a misogynist and a supporter of slavery. I think the only way one can come to those conclusions is if they don't carefully read the text in the context of the culture of the day. In several of his letters, Paul turns the church culture totally around. He asks nothing of women and children more than the culture demanded of them. However, Paul put an incredible demand of submission and love onto men and slave owners.

In this letter to Philemon, who is a Christian slave owner, we will see how Paul deals with it. Now keep this in mind as we study through this book. Onesimus is a run-a-way slave. Somehow he finds himself in Rome and ends up being converted to Christianity and serving the Apostle Paul willingly. Previously, while Paul was preaching in Ephesus, it seems that a man named Epaphras heard the Gospel, converted to Christianity, and brought the Gospel message back to Colosse where many heard it and were converted. A church sprung up and started to meet in Philemon's house.

Even though it appears that Paul never personally made it to Colosse, it seems as if he had personally met Philemon or at least had a correspondence with him in which they got to know one another. Or perhaps Philemon simply feels as if he owes his salvation to Paul.

Here is the tension in the book that we may not feel because we are so removed from the historical situation. When slaves ran away, it was customary to arrest them, treat them brutally, and ultimately execute them. Since owning slaves was so common, other slave owners would be watching to see how Philemon dealt with his run-a-way slave. If he showed him any sort of mercy, he would lose the respect of other slave owners in the city.

On the other hand, both he and Onesimus were Christians. How he dealt with Onesimus is going to be a test of his loyalty to Christ. I'm sad to say that in the modern day churches, when culture and Christianity clash, most "Christians" end up placing their ethnicity and culture above Christianity. It will be a good test for us as we study through this book to see where our loyalty lies. The bottom line issue is this: What energizes our thoughts and behaviors; Christ ... or ... anything else? The question is important because if anything other than Christ energizes our thoughts and behaviors, then we are idolaters. Further, if we are worshipping false gods, then we may not be Christian at all.

Many modern day scholars who want to discredit the Bible try and pit the book of James against the writings of Paul and say they contradict each other. James said that faith without works is dead. In other words, how we think and act determine where our faith is.

On the other hand, Paul clearly says that we are saved by faith alone. However, what these scholars miss is the fact that Paul often points out that authentic faith leads to a lifestyle that is consistent with Biblical mandates.

In other words, for Paul, faith has very specific outcomes. When faced with a decision, it doesn't matter what our friends tell us, it doesn't matter what our husbands or wives tell us, it doesn't matter what our ethnic cultures tell us. What matters is what God tells us in His Word, the Bible. We are to submit to the plain commands of Scripture.

I've titled this sermon, "Energized Faith." In other words, the book of Philemon is all about how we are to make decisions and live our lives. It's important to realize whether our faith in Christ is

what energizes our thoughts and behaviors or if our own lust, pride, and the world are energizing our thoughts and behaviors.

When I was in college, I hung around with a group that took grades seriously. For us, it was all about competing with one another. If there was extra credit on a test, it would be considered a failure if we got a hundred percent. If there was a total of 15 extra credit points, we had to get 115 % on the test. It was clear that we were not motivated by the thirst for knowledge and certainly not to glorify God by our studies. We were driven by pride, competition, and the lust to be the best and the smartest in the group.

One of our professors knew how we were so he decided to teach us a lesson. He handed out the test. He told us to read the instructions and then to take the test. Since it was a fairly long test, and since there were extra credit questions, we immediately dug in. We furiously wrote and calculated the answers. About 40 minutes into the test, almost to a person, we put our pencils down and you could hear a collective groan. It was like someone punched us in the stomach all at the same time.

There were about 100 questions on the test. Here is what question #97 was, "Don't answer any of the test questions except this one. Just sign your test paper, hand it in, and have a great weekend."

We had all failed to follow the directions. The directions stated that we should read through the entire test before taking the test. Had we been energized by humility and the desire to learn we could have saved ourselves 40 minutes of grief and an "F" on the exam. However, we made our lives miserable because we were energized by pride and the lust to be superior.

This incident didn't cost us much in proportion to the lesson we learned. However, many people in our society are suffering and are miserable because they are energized by something or someone other than Jesus Christ.

The main idea for this morning's text is pretty straight forward. **CHRISTIAN LIVING IS ALL ABOUT LIVING FOR CHRIST.** Life is not about our search for happiness and fulfillment. Life is not about our pursuit of success or status. Paul summed up his philosophy for life nicely in his letter to the Galatians:

<sup>20</sup>"I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me" (Galatians 2:20 / NIV).

Life is not about me. Life is not about you. Life is all about God. We ought to be dead to ourselves; to our lust, to our pride, to our self-centered and self-absorbed lives. We have been saved by grace through faith. And a life of saving faith is lived in Christ and for Christ.

## **I. EXAMINING THE MAIN CHARACTERS (VS 1-3)**

### **Christians Live To Serve Christ.**

Let's see how Paul sets up this concept in the book of Philemon and let's examine ourselves as we examine some of these concepts. In verses 1-3, we can examine the main characters. In this section we can easily see that CHRISTIANS LIVE TO SERVE CHRIST.

We have to keep in mind that the New Testament books authored by the Apostle Paul are actually letters written to churches or individuals. This is a personal letter to Philemon who is part of the Colossian church. The first part of this letter follows the standard format for letters of Paul's day.

### **A. PAUL AND TIMOTHY (1a)**

In the first half of verse 1, we are introduced to Paul and Timothy. Of course Paul is the famous Apostle of the book of Acts and the New Testament letters. Timothy is Paul's protégé and fellow

traveler who later becomes the pastor of the troubled church in Ephesus. It appears that Paul is imprisoned in Rome and Timothy is free to come and go. The letter appears to be written and delivered at the same time Paul wrote and Epaphras along with Onesimus delivered the letter to Colosse.

But here is what I want to point out about this. Paul describes himself as a prisoner of Christ Jesus. In fact Paul is a prisoner of the Roman governmental system. He is not free to go where he wishes. He is under arrest and guarded by Roman guards. I want us to understand that Christianity is all about God and not about us or our circumstances. Paul does not say that he is a prisoner of Rome. He says he is a prisoner of Christ Jesus. The only way for Christians to live godly lives is to focus our attention on God and not on our circumstances. This will be important for this letter because it is going to focus on a run-a-way slave. Paul often refers to himself and other Christian workers as slaves of Jesus Christ. So even though Timothy is a free man according to Roman law, he is just as much a prisoner of Christ Jesus as Paul is. And Paul, Timothy, and all the other characters we meet are slaves of Jesus Christ as well.

Jesus died to set us free from the bondage of sin, Satan, fear, and death. He did not set us free from service to Him. Listen to what Paul tells the Corinthian church:

*<sup>18</sup>Flee from sexual immorality. All other sins a man commits are outside his body, but he who sins sexually sins against his own body. <sup>19</sup>Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; <sup>20</sup>you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your body" (I Corinthians 6:18-20 / NIV).*

If we are truly Christians, we are not free to do whatever we want. We were bought and paid for by the precious blood of Jesus. We belong to Him. He is the Lord, we are His servants.

## **B. PHILEMON AND FAMILY (1b-2)**

In the second half of verse 1 and verse 2 we are introduced to Philemon and his family. First of all, Philemon is the intended recipient of this letter. We will find out that he is the owner of the run-a-way slave Onesimus. From these verses we know that the Colossian church meets in his house. Paul addresses Philemon as a dearly beloved friend and a fellow worker. We throw those words around emotionally and without much definition. But Philemon is a dearly beloved friend because they are both intimate friends with Jesus Christ. They are fellow workers because they both work for the same master, Jesus Christ. Paul's master is Jesus Christ. Timothy's master is Jesus Christ. Philemon's master is Jesus Christ. And ultimately we are going to learn that the slave in question Onesimus also serves Jesus Christ as master. Something all Christians must remember is that if we are all true believers, we serve the same Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Next, we are introduced to Apphia. In this part of the Roman world, women often held important positions in running the household affairs. Apphia seems to be Philemon's wife. We can easily see why Paul said that one of the qualifications for elders and deacons was that they had believing spouses. It would be important because if the church met in their homes, it would be necessary for both husband and wife to be of like mind to pull it off. Women were important to the early church. In fact it seems as if Paul started the Philippian church with some prominent women.

The next person we are introduced to is Archippus. Tradition has identified Archippus as the adult son of Philemon and Apphia. Here Paul refers to him as a fellow soldier. Again for Paul, everything is put in the context of the Gospel. And if you remember from our study through Colossians, Paul says this in his closing remarks:

*<sup>17</sup>Tell Archippus: 'See to it that you complete the work you have received in the Lord'" (Colossians 4:17 / NIV).*

It seems as if Archippus plays a fairly important role in the Colossian church as well. Perhaps he has been commissioned as an evangelist or a church leader. At any rate, Paul reminds him to be faithful in his service to the Lord Jesus Christ.

At this point we are introduced to the Colossian church. The church is meeting in Philemon's house. I want to comment on two things here. First of all, Epaphras founded the Colossian church but the established local church is meeting now in Philemon's house. Ministry is always accomplished by teamwork.

Secondly, and more importantly for us, there is no such thing as a personal life for Christians. Even though this letter has to do with a very private affair between Philemon and his run-a-way slave, Paul makes it clear by addressing this to the church as well as to Philemon that all of our actions affect one another as the church. There is no sin that I commit that doesn't affect you and there is no sin that you commit that doesn't affect me. How we treat our wives, husbands, children, coworkers, neighbors, etc. affects the church.

Think about this. Let's say you are a person who is arrogant at work, or hard to get along with at work, nasty or abusive at home. However, at church and with church people you are nice. I may come in contact with your coworkers or neighbors or friends and try to evangelize them for Christ. Because of your bad behavior or my bad behavior, we can destroy the reputation of Christ and the church. Think about this the next time you are about to sin. The Greek word *doxa* that we translate glory means reputation in everyday Greek. We are to bring glory to God by the way we think and behave. If we are sinning then we are destroying the reputation of God and because the church is God's we destroy the reputation of the church.

There is no such thing as a private life for Christians.

### **C. GOD (3)**

Along with this concept, we are introduced to God as the main character in verse 3. If you quickly look through these verses with me, you can easily see that. In the first part of verse 1 Paul identifies himself as a prisoner of Christ. In verse 3 he identifies the only true source of grace and peace as coming from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. In verse 5 we are to place our faith in the Lord Jesus. And in verse 6 he informs us that every good thing we have is in Christ.

Along these lines, I have to remind us that Christian grace and peace are never dependent on circumstances. These are gifts from God that are meant to transcend our situations. If we simply experience grace and peace when things are going well for us, then we are idolaters. We worship pleasure. Paul is exhorting them with grace and peace from jail. And further, from our study through Colossians, we know that they are facing some difficulties that threaten their church. And yet Paul greets them with grace and peace. These can't be manufactured. They are only given as gifts from God.

The upshot of this section is this. Our lives belong to Christ and because we belong to Christ, we also belong to one another. What you do in private and what I do in private affects the health of the church. We are not placed on this earth to pursue pleasure and happiness and to fulfill our lusts. CHRISTIANS LIVE TO SERVE CHRIST.

## **II. EXAMINING THEIR PRAYER LIFE (VS 4-6)**

### **Christians Pray To Accomplish God's Will.**

In examining the main characters of this letter, we found out that they were all totally sold out to serving God. In verses 4-6 we are invited to examine their prayer lives. Contrary to the way most of us pray, we see that CHRISTIANS PRAY TO ACCOMPLISH GOD'S WILL. When I hear people pray, I notice that modern day prayer is centered on our needs, our wants, and our desires. We don't spend time reminding ourselves that Jesus prayed, "Father, Your will be done," and "Your kingdom come Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven."

### **A. THANKSGIVING (4-5)**

Paul is in jail and the Colossian church is trying to fight off false teachings. And yet when Paul goes to prayer, the first thing that comes to his mind is thanksgiving in verses 4-5. Even our thanksgiving prayers are shallow prayers. They too are focused on what we have received from God. We thank God for getting well, for finding our children jobs, or getting them into school, etc. Those are all good and legitimate, but we are still too focused on ourselves and the things of this world.

Paul is focused on God's agenda for the world. He thanks God for Philemon's and the church's faith in the Lord Jesus and their love for fellow Christians. If we want to grow and mature as Christians, we must learn to pray that God's will be done in and through our lives. We must become people of thanksgiving and leave behind all attitudes of entitlement.

## **B. FAITH TO BE PROVED AUTHENTIC (6)**

In verse 6 Paul prays that their faith to be proved authentic. This verse is very complicated to deal with in English because of the different meanings our English words have. The verse is not all that complicated in Greek. Let's deal with the first phrase. Paul says that his prayer is that Philemon and the church be active in sharing their faith. Now in English, when we talk about sharing our faith, we mean evangelizing someone. In other words, we share our faith with an unbeliever in the hope of them becoming a believer. I'm sure this part of the meaning is included.

However, let me translate this phrase literally, "that fellowship of your faith may become active." The word *koinonia* that we usually translate fellowship in English is where the NIV gets the word sharing. After all, fellowshipping in Greek means sharing. The early church shared all their possessions, their money, their heartbreaks, and their triumphs. They lived, suffered, and died together. So Paul could be referring to their shared faith. In other words, Paul is asking that their shared faith in Christ lead to some sort of action. If we are Christians, then we share life in Christ together. We have a shared faith. And if we authentically share this faith, it ought to lead to specific types of behaviors. So let me just summarize this so far. Paul is saying that as we share our shared faith with one another and unbelievers, the following actions should result.

The second half of that phrase, "may become active," is also interesting. The word for active is *enargeis*. That sounds a lot like our word energized. The word is translated as reality or activated. In other words, Paul prays that the sharing of our shared faith energize us to do good works according to God's will. I'll get to that next. But I think that idea that Paul is after here is that our faith in Christ is what is meant to energize us to do His will. Nothing else is acceptable. We often do good works because we look good according to our particular culture and our circle of friends and family. I often do good things for people I like simply because I like them. That's not what we are talking about here. Before we get to the next phrase, let me just quote a passage from Ephesians one more time:

*"<sup>8</sup>For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—<sup>9</sup>not by works, so that no one can boast. <sup>10</sup>For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do" Ephesians 2:8-10 / NIV).*

We are saved by grace through faith. That faith is to become a reality. It is to come to life by finding and accomplishing all the good works that God has prepared for us in advance to do. Now some people think they are free to do what they want or participate in the ministries they want. But all of life is a ministry and God has prepared all sorts of good works for us to accomplish along the way.

Now let's get to the second phrase in verse 6. The NIV has the words correct but let me again give you a literal translation, "in understanding every good thing which is in you in Christ Jesus." This is the marriage of faith and works. First of all we must constantly acknowledge the fact that there is nothing good in us apart from Christ. I never was good nor will I ever be good. The only goodness in me is that of Jesus working in and through me by the Holy Spirit.

We truly are saved by grace through faith. We truly are being saved by grace through faith. We truly will be saved by grace through faith.

At the same time, God has a will for each individual, each local church, for the universal church, and the world. He has laid out good works for us to find and to accomplish as we journey towards our eternal destinations in heaven. And that is where our faith proves to be authentic or not. True faith learns to submit to God's guidance as revealed in the Bible through humble obedience.

So Paul is praying that Philemon and the church submit to God in humble obedience by sharing their shared faith to the point it comes alive in good works that God has preplanned for them. For our prayer lives, this section means this. CHRISTIANS PRAY TO ACCOMPLISH GOD'S WILL.

### **III. EXAMINING THE POWER OF LOVE (VS 7)**

#### **Christian Love Leaves People Refreshed.**

We have seen that authentic believers live for God and with God at the center of their lives. Since authentic believers are concerned with serving God, they study the Bible to find God's will and pray for opportunities to accomplish God's will. In verse 7, we are invited to examine the power of love. CHRISTIAN LOVE LEAVES PEOPLE REFRESHED.

#### **A. THE ONLY TRUE SOURCE OF LOVE**

This first point is essential. The only true source of love is God. From the last section we said that there is nothing good in us apart from God. Therefore, if we want to truly love people, the source has got to be God. I can't tell you how oppressive some Christians are when trying to love people. Because of arrogance, some Christians try to help people by taking control of their lives and telling what they should do. Any time people do good works out of any other motive but to glorify God, they will end up alienating the people they are trying to help and they will end up burned out themselves. They will often accuse other Christians of being uncaring. Many people do good because they feel good about themselves when they do good or they want to look good.

Ministry out of love for Christ alone will bring joy both to the giver and the receiver. True love is given humbly and gently and is always concerned about the dignity of the receiver. The source of true love is Christ alone.

#### **B. THE GIFTS OF LOVE**

The gifts of love are exactly that, gifts. The word for gift, grace, and joy are all the same word in Greek, Xaris. Earlier, Paul greeted them with grace. Here joy is the same word. The first spiritual grace of love is joy. Again, I have to say that joy should be dependent on our relationship with God, never on what circumstances we find ourselves in. If we allow God to love people through us, they will experience joy, and so will we.

In addition to the grace of joy, Godly love will produce the grace of encouragement. Here is another interesting word. The word encouragement is parakleisis. It means to comfort, to encourage, to counsel, to intercede for, to defend, and to guide. It literally means to come alongside or to walk alongside. It is the ministry of the Holy Spirit and in fact, the Holy Spirit is referred to as the Paraclete. We need to always be careful that we are giving counsel according to the Bible, not what we think is right or good. True encouragement comes from letting the Holy Spirit minister to other in and through us.

God graces us and others with joy and encouragement as we learn to love Him, submit to Him, and open ourselves to allowing Him to love others through us. And finally, I think that rest is truly a sign of God's love. Authentic ministry ought to leave all involved refreshed. Philemon and this Colossian church understood how to minister. People were refreshed after being with them.

This is kind of a good test. When you leave certain people, do they leave you drained or do they leave you refreshed. Here is our goal. The word refreshed is anapauo. It is the same word Jesus uses in Matthew 11:

*<sup>28</sup>Then Jesus said, "Come to me, all of you who are weary and carry heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. <sup>29</sup>Take my yoke upon you. Let me teach you, because I am humble and gentle, and you will find rest for your souls. <sup>30</sup>For my yoke fits perfectly, and the burden I give you is light" (Matthew 11:28-30 / NLT).*

Legalistic people, self-righteous people, proud people, and self-absorbed people will never bring you rest because the way to find rest and refreshment is to have the giver give in all humility and gentleness. The giver must truly be selfless. The receiver must also receive with a humble and gentle spirit. God's way is humble and gentle. People who are unhappy and unsettled in their own personal lives can never hope to offer the love grace of rest and refreshment because they don't have it themselves to give.

The power of Christian love only comes from the ministry of the Holy Spirit. Joy, encouragement, and rest are love graces of God given to us to enjoy and share with others. CHRISTIAN LOVE LEAVES PEOPLE REFRESHED.

#### IV. EPILOGUE

Because we live in a society that emphasizes individual rights and that fosters attitudes of entitlement, we as Christians have forgotten that we are not free to do as we wish. Life is not about our individual right to happiness. **CHRISTIAN LIVING IS ALL ABOUT LIVING FOR CHRIST.**

In his commentary on Philemon, David Garland summarizes the modern day church culture in which we live like this:

*"Unfortunately, many have lost a sense of bonding with other Christians and generally see no interconnection between the business they conduct in their private household and their membership in a spiritual household. Many insist that they are free to manage their own lives without any thought to what other Christians might think or how it might affect them. In our culture we see the church more as 'a voluntary association of people who happen to hold the same religious views.' Paul, however, saw membership in the church as something far more, and in this letter he shows how two households, the natural and the spiritual, intersect. He understood that what Philemon decided to do with his unfaithful slave, a purely private matter over which he had the final say, would have consequences for his whole house church. Paul allows Philemon to decide completely for himself what he will do, but he expects that he will consider how his decision will have impact on his community of faith. Since the house church meets in his home, his ethical decisions will have immediate repercussions for the whole church.*

*Things have not changed in this regard. How leaders respond to the demands of love in everyday decisions directly effects the spiritual health of the whole congregation. It matters greatly whether they show love or disdain for others, whether they refresh or drain the hearts of the saints, whether their actions stem from profound spiritual knowledge or from shallow spiritual illiteracy, whether they are motivated by selfishness or selflessness. The cause of Christ has had its reputation blackened by many who have ignored the effect of their business decisions on their church."*