

FAITH-ING

PHILEMON 17-25

**FAITH IS AUTHENTIC WHEN IT MANIFESTS ITSELF IN
GODLY ATTITUDES AND BEHAVIORS.**

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Philemon 17-25

I know the title of the sermon may be confusing but I didn't know how else to get across the point I was after. The word faith in Greek is used as both a noun and a verb. However, in English we only use it as a noun. What we do in English when the word faith is used as a verb in Greek, is that we change it to believing. The problem with that is when we say believing in English, it doesn't mean what it does in Greek. I gave you my definition of biblical faith before, "Faith is action that is taken based on a particular belief."

It's almost if Jesus' brother James knew we would mess this up. That's why he made it clear in his New Testament letter:

¹⁷So you see, it isn't enough just to have faith. Faith that doesn't show itself by good deeds is no faith at all—it is dead and useless.

¹⁸Now someone may argue, "Some people have faith; others have good deeds." I say, "I can't see your faith if you don't have good deeds, but I will show you my faith through my good deeds."

¹⁹Do you still think it's enough just to believe that there is one God? Well, even the demons believe this, and they tremble in terror!" (James 2:17-19 / NLT).

You see what we have done in the United States today with Christianity is to disintegrate it into the Greek religions of Paul's day. The Greeks separated their everyday lives from their religious lives. They had religious duties like going to their temples to worship. They would bring gifts and do their religious duties. But that didn't translate into their everyday lives. Once they left the temple, their religious duty was ended. They could murder, steal, prostitute themselves, and do anything they wanted. It did not affect their religious standing in the least.

Many people consider themselves Christians because they believe the right stuff about Jesus. They go to church, give money, and serve. They don't harm anybody during the week and they try in general to be good citizens and neighbors.

We separate our everyday professional lives from our religious lives. I'm always amused when I hear politicians and famous people talk about their religious lives. I'm saddened to see so many normal church-going people delude themselves into thinking they're Christians.

The Bible is very clear that authentic faith is action that is based on the right belief of Who Jesus is, who we are, and what God expects of us. Faith only becomes real to us when we are in trouble and have nowhere to turn.

Let me give you an example. An atheist was spending a quiet day fishing when suddenly his boat was attacked by the Loch Ness monster. In one easy flip, the beast tossed him and his boat high into the air. Then it opened its mouth to swallow both.

As the man sailed head over heels, he cried out, "oh, my God! Help me!"

At once, the ferocious attack scene froze in place, as the atheist hung in mid-air, a booming voice came down from the clouds, "I thought you didn't believe in Me!"

"Come on God, give me a break!!" the man pleaded. "Two minutes ago I didn't believe in the Loch Ness monster either!"

Oh, we're very good at exercising faith when we are about to lose everything and have nowhere to turn but to God. But the question for true believers is the opposite. When we already have everything and when exercising faith means we will lose everything, are we willing to be faithful in those circumstances as well? When Onesimus chose to go back to his slave owner, he was risking severe treatment, beating, and perhaps even death. And yet because of his faith in God, he gave up his freedom to return to Colosse.

How will Philemon now respond in faith? If he forgives Onesimus and welcomes him home like a brother, he will lose face among his peers. He will become a social outcast. And how will the other slaves act now? Will they too run away if Onesimus is not punished? Paul has brought Philemon face to face with authentic faith. Will he just believe in Jesus like the demons do ... or will he act out now on the belief that Jesus is his Lord?

Christianity is not just believing the right stuff, coming to church and doing religious stuff. And on the other side, Christianity is not just going around doing good stuff. Christianity is actions that are based on the truths of Scripture to first of all include that Jesus is Lord and He will soon come to judge the living and the dead. The main idea of this morning's text is this. **FAITH IS AUTHENTIC WHEN IT MANIFESTS ITSELF IN GODLY ATTITUDES AND BEHAVIORS.** We are indeed saved by grace through faith. But the question each of us should ask ourselves is this; "Is our faith authentic biblical faith or some distorted worldly type of faith?"

I. FAITH ATTITUDES & BEHAVIORS (VS 17-19)

Faithful Christians Are Submissive To Scripture.

Verses 17-19 describe faith attitudes and behaviors. That works itself out like this. **FAITHFUL CHRISTIANS ARE SUBMISSIVE TO SCRIPTURE.** The Bible clearly states that even though we are made righteous by the blood of Jesus, all of us are filled with unrighteous thoughts and behaviors. And yet, over all my years in the ministry, it is rare that I find people who read the Bible and understand how far short they come from God's expectations for us. In other words, I don't think anyone of us should be able to read the Bible or listen to a sermon and come away without God having pointed out some horrible sin in our lives.

I think that most of us church people come to church feeling pretty good about ourselves. We think we are pretty good. Many of us can't even imagine that we sin. And if we do sin, we can't imagine that God is upset with us. Let's say that I understand this concept and I come to view myself as the Bible does without the blood of Christ covering me. I am a piece of garbage. I will always be a piece of garbage until that one glorious day when Jesus returns and transforms me in the twinkling of an eye.

Now if I think that I'm a piece of garbage and you think you are good, then how can we journey together? If you think your life is good, then what do you hope to learn when I preach or teach? Are we here to be entertained or to gain some intellectual knowledge? The only way to come to a bible teaching or to a sermon is to come expecting God the Holy Spirit to point out an area of our lives that is not surrendered to Him. If we think we are pretty good, then there is absolutely no need to come to church. It's a waste of time.

A. SHIPMATES (17)

But let's get back to the point of journeying together through life. In verse 17 Paul describes fellow Christians as shipmates. I love how this translates into English. Paul says, "So if you consider me a partner." The word for partner is *koinonios*. It comes from the same root word used to describe the noun fellowship and the verb to fellowship. In other words, Paul is describing his relationship with Philemon as fellow-shippers.

Even though in the Greek this has nothing to do with a nautical reference, it is great the way it translates in English. Partners are fellow-shippers with one another. We are shipmates on the sea of life. Hopefully we are all intending to sail to the same destination. Paul is about to check where Philemon is sailing. Here is where faith comes in. Paul is shipmates with Philemon but Paul is also shipmates with Onesimus, Philemon's run-away-slave. That means that Philemon and Onesimus are shipmates as well if indeed they are all on the same faith-ship. Are they all headed for heaven? Is Jesus indeed the Lord and Captain of their ship?

Sometimes I think we read the Bible too fast. Paul just told Philemon to welcome Onesimus just as he would welcome him. Think about this. Paul is saying that if indeed they were all shipmates, then Philemon will welcome Onesimus, the run-away-slave, just as he would welcome Paul, a lead Apostle in the church. Philemon would roll out the red carpet, open up the best wine, and have a banquet feast to welcome him. Paul is an honored apostle. Paul is like a pope or a modern day bishop to Philemon.

And now Paul is saying, "If you really believe this Christianity stuff, then you will roll out the red carpet, open your finest wine, and have a banquet feast for Onesimus, your run-away-slave. What kind of faith will it take for Philemon to look at Onesimus as if he were looking at Paul? If we are genuine Christians, then what kind of faith will it take for us to look at one another as if we were Christ?"

B. PICKING UP THE TAB (18)

Verse 18 goes on to describe what picking up the tab looks like. Paul says, "If he has done you any wrong or owes you anything, charge it to me." Paul said "if" Onesimus has cost you anything. The case is and the facts are that Onesimus did cost Philemon. Definitely by running away, Onesimus has cost Philemon lost wages, lost service, and replacement costs. It's very likely that perhaps Onesimus stole money or property to finance his escape to Rome. Most of all, Onesimus has put Philemon in a predicament. How does he deal with this run-away-slave since they are now brothers?

I guess that one of the things that have most shocked me in recent years is the misunderstanding of what part restitution plays in restoration and reconciliation. True repentance manifests itself through restitution. Paul didn't tell Philemon to just write off the loss. Paul was picking up a tab that Onesimus had no way of paying. But look at the humility of Onesimus. He has wronged Philemon. He has done wrong to him. Onesimus could have hidden out in Rome and suffered no consequences. And yet because of the conviction of his newfound faith in Christ, he himself delivers the letter. He, like the Prodigal Son in Jesus' parable, has agreed to be treated with whatever harshness Philemon decides. It is a very rare thing to see modern day Christians who have committed sins willing to give up all their rights as part of the restitution process. People have told me that restitution is strictly an Old Testament practice. Just to put that misconception to rest, let me just read to you an event in the life of Jesus:

¹Jesus entered Jericho and made his way through the town. ²There was a man there named Zacchaeus. He was one of the most influential Jews in the Roman tax-collecting business, and he had become very rich. ³He tried to get a look at Jesus, but he was too short to see over the crowds. ⁴So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree beside the road, so he could watch from there.

⁵When Jesus came by, he looked up at Zacchaeus and called him by name. "Zacchaeus!" he said. "Quick, come down! For I must be a guest in your home today."

⁶Zacchaeus quickly climbed down and took Jesus to his house in great excitement and joy. ⁷But the crowds were displeased. "He has gone to be the guest of a notorious sinner," they grumbled.

⁸Meanwhile, Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord, "I will give half my wealth to the poor, Lord, and if I have overcharged people on their taxes, I will give them back four times as much!"

⁹Jesus responded, "Salvation has come to this home today, for this man has shown himself to be a son of Abraham. ¹⁰And I, the Son of Man, have come to seek and save those like him who are lost" (Luke 19:1-10 / NLT).

Zacchaeus acted out his faith by making restitution beyond any Old Testament command. Restitution is a sign of genuine sorrow. It is a sign of true brokenness.

But what if we find ourselves in a situation where the damage we have done is beyond our ability to make restitution? Giving up one's rights and placing one at the mercy of the one owed is the only possible sign of brokenness. The Prodigal Son returned broken. He told his father to treat him as a slave and not as a son. Even though Onesimus could have stayed away, he went home broken in Christ to an uncertain future. Why is this whole verse necessary?

If you look at two words in this verse, it becomes very clear. First Paul said that if Onesimus had done any wrong to Philemon. The word for wrong does not mean someone made a mistake or a slip. The word used here for wrong is *adikeo*. It means unrighteous. And Paul goes on to say that if Onesimus owes Philemon anything. We all have debts of unrighteousness that we have no way of paying for. Jesus said to the Father, "Put it on my tab. If John owes anything for his unrighteousness, put it on my tab." And then Jesus took on human flesh, was tortured, humiliated, and crucified to pay the debt I could not pay.

C. PROPER PERSPECTIVE (19)

And Paul kind of points that out to Philemon when he puts things in proper perspective in verse 19. Paul seems to have this written this letter in his own hand. Usually he used an amanuensis to write his letters and then at the end, Paul would add a greeting in his own hand. Paul said he was willing to pay Onesimus' restitution. And then Paul goes on to remind Philemon that he owes his salvation to Paul's preaching. But the real perspective is this. Jesus paid restitution for Paul, Philemon, and Onesimus. Compared to what Jesus paid on their behalf, what could any of them possibly owe one another?

That is the whole basis for Jesus' parable of the unmerciful servant. The King forgave a debtor in His kingdom of millions of dollars that the debtor could never possibly pay. The forgiven debtor immediately went out and found a debtor who owed him money, a very small amount that could easily be paid. Instead of having mercy on this poor fellow, the unmerciful servant had him thrown in jail. Even without the King's reaction, everyone around understood the absurdity and evil connected with the action. To put life into perspective, we will all do well to remind ourselves daily that Jesus paid a debt we could not possibly pay. When we read our bibles or listen to a teaching or a sermon, we must keep in mind that Jesus wants us to obey Scripture. **FAITHFUL CHRISTIANS ARE SUBMISSIVE TO SCRIPTURE.**

II. FAITH EXPECTATIONS (VS 20-22)

Faithful Christians Ought To Be Predictable And Dependable.

So if we are shipmates, we should be able to assume we are controlled by the Lord Jesus through His word, the Bible. Further, verses 20-22 inform us of faith expectations. In other words **FAITHFUL CHRISTIANS OUGHT TO BE PREDICTABLE AND DEPENDABLE.** In the field, it is imperative that all soldiers can be depended upon. For example, when approaching an encampment, the soldier on guard duty will give a verbal cue. The approaching soldier is expected to give the correct countersign. If the wrong countersign is given, the soldier on guard duty will shoot the imposter. If I'm a Christian and you're a Christian, we should be able to count on one another to think and act in particular ways.

A. JOYFUL (20)

Verse 20 indicates that authentic Christians are joyful. Look at the wording here. Paul is saying that he hopes Philemon will act correctly because that would refresh Paul's heart. Do you remember earlier in the letter that Paul commended Philemon for always acting in ways that refresh other Christians? If Philemon acts out in faith towards Onesimus, then Paul will be filled with joy. Even though good parents, teachers and pastors do not tie up their egos in their children, students, and disciples, they always feel refreshed to see them make good choices, and

discouraged when they choose poorly. That's why being a parent, teacher, or pastor is like being on an emotional roller coaster. Being human, people are going to choose wisely sometimes and poorly at other times. Good godly behavior brings joy to many people. Evil behavior brings sadness to many people. If we are authentic Christians, we should be acting in ways that bring joy to one another.

B. OBEDIENT (21)

Faithful Christians are described as obedient in verse 21. Paul knows what kind of guy Philemon is. He is trustworthy. He is humble. He is committed to following Christ. We should be able to count on and depend on what one another will do. Paul knows that Philemon will submit to his teaching, his authority, and his love. He knows that Philemon loves God and will do what God commands. Paul is confident in both of these guys. Onesimus could be counted on to go back to Colosse. Even though he risked being punished, beaten, jailed, or killed, Onesimus went home. Even though this act of receiving Onesimus will cost Philemon the lack of respect by his peers and his other slaves, financial loss, and humiliation, Paul knows he can count on Philemon to do the right thing. If you were reading your Bible and looking at me live my life, would they be in agreement? If I was reading the Bible while looking at your life, would they be consistent? We really should be living our lives in submission to the word of God.

C. HOPEFUL (22)

If we do this, people around us should be hopeful as described in verse 22. Paul is in prison. And yet, because he sees God working in so many different ways, he is hopeful. Paul led Onesimus to salvation while in prison. Onesimus has agreed to return to the slave master that he ran away from. He knows that Philemon is going to be an incredible testimony to believers and unbelievers alike. Paul is hopeful of two things. Remember earlier he told Philemon to welcome Onesimus as he would Paul. Paul says here, "Get the guestroom ready for me." In essence, Paul knows that Philemon will have the guestroom ready for Onesimus. Secondly, Paul is hopeful that he too will one day be able to use the guestroom. Authentic Christians are joyful, obedient, and hopeful. They also bring these same kinds of qualities into other people's lives as well. **FAITHFUL CHRISTIANS OUGHT TO BE PREDICTABLE AND DEPENDABLE.**

III. FAITH RESULTS (VS 23-25)

Faithful Christians Live Faithfully And Gracefully.

Authentic Christians are wonderful shipmates to have on our journey through life. Verses 23-25 encourage us to look for incredible faith results. **FAITHFUL CHRISTIANS LIVE FAITHFULLY AND GRACEFULLY.**

A. FAITHFUL LIVING (23-24)

Verses 23-24 show us Christians who are living faithfully. These are basically the same people mentioned at the end of Colossians. The point is that Paul is not abandoned by the church. While in prison, these faithful men and others continue to minister to his needs. One of the joys of being Christian is that we do have shipmates to share the enjoyment and excitement our journey through life. It truly is a shame that many Christians are not attending a church regularly, are not involved in church regularly, and that many, many Christians are not in a small group experience. If you have ever been in a good small group, you know how exciting living the Christian life can be. Paul is always seen in the context of a group of Christians.

B. GRACEFUL LIVING (25)

Paul closes this letter by reminding us in verse 25 that graceful living characterizes authentic Christians. He blesses Philemon and the church with the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. Authentic Christians live in grace. They are constantly and intentionally living in God's grace while at the same time dispensing grace to all those around them. We are saved by grace through faith. We live by grace through faith. We will inhabit heaven someday by grace through faith. God offers grace. We receive it through faith. **FAITHFUL CHRISTIANS LIVE FAITHFULLY AND GRACEFULLY.**

IV. EPILOGUE

When things are going really badly for us and we have no hope, it is easy to look to God in faith. The saying in the military is, "There are no atheists in a foxhole." However, let's say everything in our life is great. Would we be willing to risk losing it all if obeying God meant losing it all? Paul knew what it was to give everything up to follow God. Onesimus was going back to his master to face the music for God. Philemon would lose face, respect, and money in receiving Onesimus back. But that's what faith is all about; acting out based on our belief in God and His Word. **FAITH IS AUTHENTIC WHEN IT MANIFESTS ITSELF IN GODLY ATTITUDES AND BEHAVIORS.**

I like the N. T. Wright closes his commentary on Philemon:

"The conventional tone of the closing greeting, once again, should not blind us to the truth it conveys to us, and the power that the expressed prayer conveyed to Philemon. It is a hard thing Paul has asked of him: a superhuman task of heartfelt reconciliation and forgiveness. If he is to do it without pride or anger, he cannot do it without grace. But grace is what is available: the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, Who, though He was rich, yet for our sake became poor, that we by His poverty might become rich (2 Cor. 8:9); the same Christ Who took upon Himself the nature, and the death of the slave (Phil. 2:7-8). This Christ-shaped grace has informed Paul's whole understanding of koinonia, which has in turn dominated the whole letter. It is this same grace that is now to be with your spirit: to be let loose, by Paul's prayers and words, in Philemon's life, to make his home, and the church that meets there, the scene of a reconciliation that will prove beyond any doubt that the gospel of Jesus Christ is not a matter of talk, but of power."

Authentic faith is not simple belief or simply doing good stuff. Authentic faith is actions taken on the belief that Jesus is Lord and that the Bible is authoritative word to us.