

PHILEMON: EFFECTIVE MINISTRY AMID SENSITIVE ISSUES

Part I: Paul's Exemplary Behavior In Facing A Sensitive Issue

(Philemon 1-3)

I. Introduction

- A. Sometimes we believers face very sensitive issues in relating to relatives, coworkers or even in relating to one another in the Lord, issues that if not handled properly can create unwanted and severe interpersonal conflicts.
- B. Paul's letter to Philemon dealt with the potentially explosive issue of what to do with a runaway slave who had accepted Christ as his Savior, especially when such slaves were often killed in punishment for running away. (Ryrie Study Bible, KJV, 1978, p. 1727, "Introduction to the Letter of Paul to Philemon")
- C. The Apostle Paul in his Epistle of Philemon exemplified how to handle such an issue, and in Philemon 1-3, he exemplified the right behavior in facing such a sensitive issue, one we do well to study for our insight:

II. Paul's Exemplary Behavior In Facing A Sensitive Issue, Philemon 1-3.

- A. Paul approached the sensitive issue with **humility**, Philemon 1a:
 - 1. In all of his epistles in the New Testament, the **only** epistle in which Paul **introduced** himself as "a prisoner of Jesus Christ" was this letter to Philemon, Bible Know. Com., N. T., p. 770.
 - 2. His reason for this title for himself is explained in Philemon 9b: Paul wanted to appeal to slave master Philemon to accept his runaway slave Onesimus as a brother in Christ rather than dictate to him that he should do. Pressuring Philemon to receive back a slave he had the legal right to punish by death would not edify, but possibly incite Philemon to kill Onesimus, so Paul was approaching this highly sensitive subject with the behavior of a humble, afflicted prisoner to appeal to Philemon's kindness and diffuse his anger.
 - 3. Paul's suffering as a prisoner was actually an assignment from the Lord going back to his calling to the apostolic ministry by Christ in Acts 9:15-16, so Paul may have here hinted about his calling to remind Philemon of his own need to seek the will of the Lord in how he dealt with newly saved Onesimus.
- B. Paul approached the sensitive issue with **love**, Philemon 1b-2a:
 - 1. Paul referred to Philemon as a beloved brother and fellow laborer, sharing his expression of love and fellowship with Philemon in the Christian faith and service of the Lord, Philemon 1b.
 - 2. The apostle also referred to Philemon's wife Apphia as a "beloved" woman and to Archippus, likely Philemon's son, as a fellow soldier in the Lord, clearly expressing his love for Philemon's family, v. 2a.
- C. Paul approached the sensitive issue with **unity**, Philemon 2b:
 - 1. The apostle gave his greetings to the whole church that met in Philemon's home, Philemon 2b.
 - 2. By doing so, Paul realized his epistle would be read before the entire assembly that met in Philemon's home, that it would be keenly interested in the issue regarding Onesimus, so the apostle sought to promote the unity of the whole church in that home in view of this potentially divisive, explosive issue.
- D. Paul approached the sensitive issue with **politeness**, Philemon 3:
 - 1. Typical of his other introductions, Paul wished his readers grace and its resulting peace to be upon his readers as extended from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, Philemon 3.
 - 2. Accordingly, Paul was typically polite in his greeting, seeking to be conciliatory in his behavior.
- E. Paul approached the sensitive issue with **settling consistency**, Philemon 3:
 - 1. In giving his typically polite greeting of wishing his readers the grace and peace of God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ unto them, Paul acted in consistent alignment with his similar greetings in other letters.
 - 2. Since Onesimus had shown up at Philemon's home with this epistle (Philemon 12a), an epistle Onesimus hoped would result in his being accepted and not executed by Philemon, all the believers in the church that would be present at the reading of this letter would be sitting on the edge of their seats wondering about the fate of Philemon's former runaway slave.
 - 3. Paul accordingly sought to settle the people, emphasizing his typical greeting that wished them God's grace and resulting peace toward engendering a gracious and peaceful resolution to the crisis at hand.

Lesson: *To begin to address a sensitive, potentially life-threatening issue for a new believer in the Church in a constructive way, Paul assumed a behavior marked by humility, love, unity, politeness and settling consistency.*

Application: *If we face a potentially volatile, sensitive issue in relationships, be it with relatives, associates, fellow believers, etc., may we begin with the edifying behavior of humility, love, unity, politeness and settling consistency, what will help and not hinder our achieving an end to the crisis simply due to the WAY we APPROACH it!*