

Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, To Philemon our dear friend and co-worker,² to Apphia our sister, to 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 When I remember you in my prayers, I always thank my God⁵ because I hear of your love for all the saints and your faith toward the Lord Jesus.⁶ I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective when you perceive all the good that we may do for Christ.⁷ I have indeed received much joy and encouragement from your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you, my brother.

⁸For this reason, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do your duty,⁹ yet I would rather appeal to you on the basis of love—and I, Paul, do this as an old man, and now also as a prisoner of Christ Jesus.¹⁰ I am appealing to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I have become during my imprisonment.¹¹ Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful both to you and to me.¹² I am sending him, that is, my own heart, back to you.¹³ I wanted to keep him with me, so that he might be of service to me in your place during my imprisonment for the gospel;¹⁴ but I preferred to do nothing without your consent, in order that your good deed might be voluntary and not something forced.¹⁵ Perhaps this is the reason he was separated from you for a while, so that you might have him back 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 So if you consider me your partner, welcome him as you would welcome me.¹⁸ If he has wronged you in any way, or owes you anything, charge that to my account.¹⁹ I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand: I will repay it. I say nothing about your owing me even your own self.²⁰ Yes, brother, let me have this benefit from you in the Lord! Refresh my heart in Christ.²¹ Confident of your obedience, I am writing to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say. Philemon 1-21 NRSV

Nobody likes difficult situations. Such situations obviously have to be resolved, but it is one of the more challenging junctures we have in our life journey. Not that they don't make for a good movie or two. In 1968 a movie came out called "Guess who's coming to dinner?" It starred Spencer Tracy, Katherine Hepburn, and Sidney Portier. The premise was that a white liberal father had to come to terms with his daughter marrying an African American man. Back in 1968 it was the ultimate of difficult situations. The 1996 movie "While You were Sleeping" had it's moment when Sandra Bullock's character Lucy finally had to spill the beans, on her wedding day that she never was engaged to the family's son who had been in a coma. Of course there is also Tula from "My Big Fat Greek Wedding" who finally has to deal with her very Greek father when she dates and then is engaged to a man who is not Greek.

The letter to Philemon despite its' brevity, deals with just such a difficult situation with no "painless" resolution. Philemon was the leader of a house church (in Phlegm's own home) probably near Colossi. If Philemon had such space to house the worshipers we might assume he was well to do. From what we can infer in the letter, Philemon and Paul were very close, and Philemon himself was a very devout Christian. But this letter is not just a simple "friendly letter". Paul has a reason to write. It seems that a slave belonging to Philemon, who ran away from him, wound up with Paul (who is in prison). As a result, the slave, named Onesimus not only embraced the Christian faith, but became like a son to Paul caring for Paul's needs.

Since Onesimus is a runaway, he really couldn't stay with Paul. He had to go back to Philemon and get the "running away" part straightened out. This would be no easy feat. Slaves were considered property, and running away was the worst thing you could do. In fact slaves' running away was quite a problem in the later Roman Empire. According to the "norms" of Roman society, they were to be severely punished or even killed.

So Paul, using every trick in the book to "lay it on thick" wants Philemon to not punish Onesimus, but to "welcome" him back as a brother. Unfortunately we really don't know the outcome of this difficult situation. We can say that Paul thought it was perfectly acceptable to take on the norms of Roman society to bring reconciliation in the body of Christ at Philemon's church. In other words Paul wanted to show in visible terms Christianity in practice rather than just in words.

So what difficult situation do you find yourself in? There are two ways I guess you could go. The first is to take a "worldly" view with fighting, bitterness, and at end get your way. The other, though obviously not as easy, and devoid of some emotional "high" you might get, can be a witness to others that Christians actually live out what they say.

May God help us to choose the latter way so we might be able to sing, with authenticity of faith behind it; "They'll Know We are Christians By Our Love".

Pr. John Van Haneghan