

PHILEMON: EFFECTIVE MINISTRY AMID SENSITIVE ISSUES

Part II: Paul's Confidence In God's Discipling To Handle A Sensitive Issue

(Philemon 4-7)

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 properly handled 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 to Philemon exemplified how to handle such an issue, and in Philemon 4-7, Paul exemplified the confidence one needs in God's discipling to handle a sensitive issue, what we must follow:

II. Paul's Confidence In God's Discipling To Handle A Sensitive Issue, Philemon 4-7.

- A. In accord with both pagan and Christian customs of first-century correspondence, Paul included a word of thanksgiving in his introductory salutation of his letter to Philemon, Phm. 4; Bible Know. Com., N. T., p. 771.
- B. In that thanksgiving, Paul mentioned that he had heard of Philemon's love and faith toward the Lord Jesus and toward all the saints, Philemon 5. This expression is a figure of speech known as a chiasmus, an introverted correspondence of an "a-b-b-a" pattern where Philemon's love is put first to correspond to the fourth subject involved, the object of his love in the saints, and his faith is put second to correspond to the Lord Who is put third in the order of the expression. (E. W. Bullinger, Figures of Speech Used In The Bible, 1968, p. 374)
- C. Such a chiasmus "is by far the most stately and dignified presentation of a subject; and is always used in the most solemn and important portions of the Scriptures," Ibid.
- D. Paul then **explained why** he used such an arresting figure of speech relative to the subjects of faith in the Lord and love for the saints in verse 6, noting his great confidence in God's discipling to handle the sensitive issue of getting Philemon to receive runaway slave Onesimus back versus executing him (as follows):
 - 1. If Philemon had put his trust in Christ at salvation, that decision had so positioned him in the Lord and so powerfully impacted him in the spiritual realm that Paul knew it was only a matter of time in God's discipling of Philemon until he would fully know every good thing we believers possess in Christ, v. 6b.
 - 2. As a result of this awareness, Philemon's faith would be effectively shared in fellowship (*koinonia*, U. B. S. Grk. N. T., 1966, p. 744) with other believers in Christ, v. 6a.
 - 3. Since Paul had led Onesimus to faith in Christ, and since Philemon was a believer in the Lord as well, the spiritual dynamics of their both being disciplined by the same Lord became the spiritual basis for Paul to have confidence that there could even be a reconciliation between the two regardless of Onesimus' severe crime in that era of running away from master Philemon.
- E. In support of this confidence, Paul wrote how he and his co-laborer Timothy had great joy and encouragement in Philemon's love that had already been expressed to other believers, for Philemon had already "refreshed the hearts" of the saints in the Lord, Philemon 1, 7 NIV.
- F. The NIV expression "**hearts** of the saints" (v. 7 NIV, ESV) compares to the KJV's expression "**bowels** of the saints," the Greek word behind "hearts" or "bowels" in the translations being *splanchna*, literally meaning "inward parts, entrails" and figuratively as here, "seat of the emotions; heart," Arndt & Gingrich, A Grk.-Eng. Lex. of the N. T., 1967, p. 770.
- G. Thus, Paul and Timothy had great joy and encouragement in Philemon's love that had already been expressed toward other believers since the very seat of their emotions and heart had been refreshed by him, Ibid., Bible Know. Com., N. T., p. 772. If Philemon's faith had already so effectively led to such energizing of his love to have such a great alleviation of discomfort in other believers, Paul and Timothy were confident Philemon would be able and willing to express refreshing love to Onesimus who was returning as a brother in Christ.

Lesson: *Since Paul and Timothy had heard of Philemon's faith in Christ, which faith had shown its reality by God's work in his heart to cause him greatly to refresh the seat of emotions and hearts of other believers, Paul and Timothy were confident that Philemon's faith would equip him by God's work in him to be able and willing to receive Onesimus back regardless if he was a runaway slave deserving of death under the institution of slavery.*

Application: *If we face a sensitive issue in relating to other true believers, those who have given ample evidence of God's work in their lives, we can rely on God's work in them to produce a resolution to the sensitive issue at hand.*