

The Message of Philemon

by G. Campbell Morgan

The letter to Philemon teaches us about the outworking of Christianity in individual experience, the transformation of relationships, and the power of love and faith.

Scripture: Philemon 1:1

Topics: "Transformation in Christ", "Love in Relationships"

Description

G. Campbell Morgan emphasizes the transformative power of Christianity as illustrated in the letter to Philemon, showcasing the triumph of Paul, the change in Onesimus, and the principles of Philemon. He highlights how true fellowship with Christ enables individuals to overcome circumstances, authority, and personal inclinations through love and righteousness. The sermon underscores that life in Christ alters every relationship, revealing the authenticity of one's faith through interactions with others. Morgan also points out that social evils can only be addressed through the transformation of individuals, as seen in the relationships between Paul, Philemon, and Onesimus. Ultimately, the message calls for believers to be filled with the Spirit, embody the mind of Christ, and let His word dwell richly within them.

Transcript

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b. Philippians. "Have this mind." ii. 5.

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B. THE LIVING MESSAGE

I. To the Individual

i. Life in Christ changes every Relationship.

ii. Our Relationships to others test our Relationship to Christ.

II. To the Church

Social Evils are to be changed by transformed Lives.

In this letter as in the second and third letters of John, we have pictures and portraits which serve as illustrations.

The letters of the first imprisonment of Paul, in the order of their placing in our Bible, were those to the Ephesians, the Philippians, the Colossians, and Philemon. The value of the last consists in the fact that it is an illustration of the outworking into every-day life of the great doctrines dealt with in the other three. It is a page of pictures of Christianity in its outworking. They are all boldly drawn, in bare outline, yet full of beauty. We have first, pictures of individuals; Paul, Philemon, Onesimus. Secondly, pictures of social relationships; Paul and Philemon; Paul and Onesimus; Paul, Philemon, and Onesimus; and finally we

have a picture of the Church. Thus in this one page of the New Testament we have at least seven pictures presented to the mind. Let us first look at these pictures in bare outline.

The first is that of Paul. Of course we have no biography, no autobiography; no detail about those minor matters of human life which we so perpetually emphasize when we tell the story of the lives of men; but the essential facts of his character are revealed in this letter all unconsciously by the writer.

First this letter reveals Paul as a man of triumph over circumstances in fellowship with Christ. He is seen secondly as a man triumphing over the right to exercise personal authority in the power of his love. He is also seen as a man triumphing over personal inclination in a great passion for righteousness. If there were no other revelation of Paul in the whole of the New Testament, this in itself reveals the transformation wrought in him, and manifested through him, as the result of his life in Christ, and consequent fellowship with Christ.

Paul was a prisoner in Rome, and by his imprisonment all his missionary journeyings were at an end ; the burning passion of his heart to be out upon the highway of missionary endeavour, pressing ever on to the regions beyond, might have been quenched as he found himself held by the irksome chain of his imprisonment. That, however, is not the way in which Paul refers to his imprisonment. He describes himself as "Paul a prisoner of Christ Jesus." That is perfect triumph over circumstances in the power of fellowship with Christ. That is the first fact of the outworking of Christianity in individual experience. Fellowship with Christ gives the individual perfect triumph over circumstances. Paul was a prisoner not of Rome, not of the Roman emperor, but of Jesus Christ. He saw through all the secondary, incidental things, to the primary and fundamental fact, that, to the man abandoned to the will of his Lord, nothing can happen outside the good and perfect and acceptable will of God. How many of us really know what it is, in circumstances of limitation, when all our highest aspirations seem checked and thwarted, when our passion to work for God is not allowed to find vent and exercise, to sit down and write of ourselves as the prisoners of Christ Jesus? That is the privilege of all the saints, but it is only possible to those who are living in true fellowship with Jesus Christ.

The next note is that of triumph in the power of love over the right to exercise authority. Not that the authority of Paul was lessened ; not that his appeal would fail to produce the effect he desired; but here was a man who had the right to enjoin that which was befitting, but who said, I will not enjoin, command thee ; I prefer to beseech thee for love's sake. That is the perfect victory of love in the life of a man; when he is able not to command, though his authority for so doing may be vested in Christ, but chooses rather to deal with others as God does, by beseeching in love. That is the Divine method; "As though God were intreating by us; we beseech you on behalf of Christ, be ye reconciled to God."

Then finally there was triumph over personal inclination in a passion for righteousness. Notice the two I woulds of Paul in verses thirteen and fourteen. "Whom I would fain have kept with me" is the "I would" of personal inclination. Onesimus was the child of his bonds, he would have ministered to him and made things easier for him, so that the apostle said, I would like to keep him with me. But the second "I would" is the revelation of his sacrifice of personal inclination, because he knew the other course to be right. It was a triumph over inclination in the passion for the right.

When I think of Paul I am usually impressed by the magnificence of his intellect sanctified by the indwelling Spirit; and by his tremendous devotion to his Lord; but here I see the profoundest things of his character. Christianity outworking through his experience was manifested as triumphing over

circumstances in the fellowship of Christ, so that he could say I am the prisoner of Christ, while to all human seeming he was the prisoner of Rome; triumphing over the right to exercise personal authority on highest levels, in the power of love, so that rather than enjoin, he besought; triumphing over inclination to keep Onesimus to be useful to himself, in the passion which was in his heart for the doing of the right thing in all circumstances.

The next picture is more briefly drawn. It is of "Onesimus, who was aforetime unprofitable to thee, but now is profitable to thee and to me." There was a sanctified humour in Paul's play upon words here. It was Martin Luther who said, "We are all the Lord's Onesimus, we are all the Lord's profitable servants. How have we been made profitable to the Lord? We were unprofitable." This man, said Paul in effect, when he was with you, Philemon, bore a name to which he was not true ; he is now Onesimus in reality, profitable to thee and to me.

The picture of Onesimus is that of the radical change which Christ works in the life of any man of whom He gains possession; the unprofitable becomes profitable. It is a perpetual picture of what Christ does with men. The waste, unprofitable material He makes valuable, profitable.

The last of these single pictures is that of Philemon; "Hearing of thy love, and of the faith which thou hast towards the Lord Jesus, and towards all the saints . . . for I had much joy and comfort in thy love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through thee, brother."

Philemon was a man governed by two principles, faith and love. These were associated in his practical life. As to faith Paul said, "The faith which thou hast towards the Lord Jesus, and towards all the saints." Faith towards the Lord Jesus, and faith towards the saints. The preposition employed in each case is the same; and what is meant in one case is meant in the other. The fundamental principle in the life of the Christian man is faith towards the Lord Jesus, and towards the saints; and that faith towards the Lord Jesus and towards the saints is expressed in love ; love works through faith.

The experimental order is revealed if we take the portraits in the other order. Beginning with that of Philemon, we see the principles of faith and love; glancing next at Onesimus, we see a man changed from unprofitable to profitable; finally, looking at Paul, we see the triumph of Christianity in its outworking in a threefold application.

Turning to the picture of social relationship we come first to that of Paul and Philemon. I should be inclined to write underneath the picture of these two men as I see them here, "Love seeketh not its own." The apostle wrote to his friend, "Without thy mind I would do nothing; that thy goodness should not be as of necessity, but of free will." That is very simple and very human; yet the very simplicity and humanness of it constitute its sublimity and beauty. In effect Paul said: I should like to have kept Onesimus, but I would not without thy mind. If I had kept Onesimus you would not have complained; but you would have been helpless, and your goodness would have been of necessity. I want your goodness to be manifested towards this man, of your own free will. I am seeking the development of your Christian character at its highest, noblest, and best. I would have kept him; but I am seeking not only his blessing, and his restoration to favour; but your blessing, and the development of all that is highest and best in you. If you did a good thing of necessity, it would not be on the highest level; but if a good thing be done of your own free will, it is on the highest level. Thus in this beautiful, tender, gracious regard of Paul for Philemon is revealed the love which seeketh not its own.

The next picture is that of Paul and Onesimus. Beneath that I would write the words: "Love beareth all things." The Greek word translated beareth suggests a roof upon which the rain falling, the person standing underneath is protected. Love is a covering roof; sheltering the friend beneath. "If he hath wronged thee at all, or oweth thee ought, put that to mine account," wrote Paul. Onesimus the unprofitable runaway slave was the child of Paul's very heart, the child of his bonds; and Paul's love was the roof over Onesimus which protected him. Love beareth all things. That is the relationship which Christ creates between men.

The third picture of relationship is of that between Onesimus and Philemon. Here let us write the words "Love suffereth long, and is kind." What will Christianity do in this case? Onesimus was the runaway slave of Philemon. What will Christianity do with him? Send him back. The slave must return. What will Christianity do in the case of Philemon? It will prepare him to receive him as a brother; "No longer as a servant, but more than a servant, a brother beloved" ; and as a partner, "if then thou countest me a partner, receive him as myself." Then followed that touch, which did not say the last thing, but pointed the way to it as the apostle wrote, "Having confidence in thine obedience I write unto thee, knowing that thou wilt do even beyond what I say." That something beyond was almost certainly the giving of his freedom to the slave. Christianity sent Onesimus back to fulfill the obligations of the law. Christianity taught Philemon to receive the slave kindly, and cancel the obligations of the law in the power of indwelling love.

Finally we have a picture of the church in the house of Philemon. Its title may fittingly be "Love never faileth." Paul wrote to the church, because in the highest ideal of Christianity you cannot write to the individual without the church being interested and being brought into cooperation. The true fellowship in Christ Jesus is such that if one member suffers all suffer, and if one member rejoices all rejoice; when one member fulfills obligation and goes back to duty, all the members coöperate with him in his return; if one member fulfills the law of love and receives the runaway, all the members enter into the joy of heart that comes to the one. We have here then a picture of an ideal church in which the runaway slave is to be received on his return as a brother and a partner by all who share the common life, and walk in the common light, in the power of the common love.

If this be the central teaching of these pictures of Christianity in the outworking, what is their abiding appeal? I am constrained to say that it is not to be found stated in words in the epistle. The pictures themselves create the appeal. They appeal to all who look upon them and who share the life which produces these results, to yield themselves to that life entirely, absolutely.

In order to find the appeal of this letter stated in actual words I go back to the other epistles written in imprisonment. It has often been pointed out that some of the greatest things we have ever had for our spiritual instruction were written in prison. Paul never rendered greater service to the Church of God than in those days when he was shut up in prison. No others are more wonderful, more full of light and glory, more evidently the revelation of the Spirit of God to His servant, than the letters of the imprisonment. The apostle was thinking the Ephesian, Colossian, and Philippian letters, and while such thoughts filled his mind he wrote this letter to Philemon about a runaway slave. There was a time when some thought that this page should be left out of the New Testament because the subject was not worthy the dignity of an apostle; but thank God that in His overruling in the arrangement and selection and preservation of the writings which are essentially of the Spirit, Philemon is not left out. In this epistle we see the commonplaces of every-day life set in the atmosphere and power of the sublimest things of the eternities. Philemon is but a page of pictures resulting from Ephesians, Philippians, and Colossians.

I go then to these great epistles and take from them the central words of each in order to find the words of appeal. In Ephesians, that great unveiling of the glorious Church, "Be filled with the Spirit." In Philippians, that great unveiling of Christian character, "Have this mind in you, which was also in Christ Jesus." In Colossians, that great unveiling of the glory of Christ as at the disposal of the Church, "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly." That is the threefold abiding appeal of the letter to Philemon.

How is it possible for me to live the life of faith and love? How is it possible for me, who have been most unprofitable, to be indeed a man profitable? How is it possible for me ever to know such triumph over circumstances as Paul manifested; such triumph over personal authority in the power of love; such triumph over personal inclination in the passion for righteousness?-How can I fulfill this life?

All the necessary resources are in Christ. Then the power of Christ must have full sway, and right of way in and through me; and my responsibilities are stated in the words of these great epistles, "Be filled with the Spirit," "Have this mind in you, which was also in Christ Jesus," "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly."

What then are the applications of this brief letter? First as to the individual. This letter teaches me that life in Christ changes every relationship. All the relationships that might be suggested do not appear upon this page: but those which do appear have a bearing on all the rest. My son, my daughter, my father, my husband, my wife, my neighbour; all bear new relationship to me the moment I am a man in Christ. I bear a new relationship to them, and consequently they bear a new relationship to me. I have a new relationship to my servant if I am a man in Christ. I have a new relationship to my master if I am a man in Christ.

I learn also that our relationships to others test our relationship to Christ. Not by what I sing about my Lord, not by what I affirm of relationship to Christ, but by my relationship to other men, is my relationship to my Lord made manifest. Philemon angrily refusing to receive Onesimus would have contradicted all the profession he made of love for Jesus Christ. Onesimus refusing to return to Philemon would have rendered null and void all his profession of faith in Jesus Christ. Had Paul yielded to personal inclination he would by that act have proved a measure of disloyalty to Christ. It is the relationships I bear to other men which constitute the real test of my relationship to Christ.

If I am living in true fellowship with Him, letting His mind be in me by being filled with His Spirit, and having His word richly dwelling in me, my relationship to others will be changed; and my relationship to Christ will be revealed.

There is one word of application to the Church at large. From this letter one of the profoundest matters is learned; that social evils are to be ended by the transformation men, and in no other way. There is no protest here against slavery. There was a day when Christian teachers used this very letter in defence of slavery. We know full well that any such use was absolutely unwarranted. Onesimus was sent back to Philemon, but Philemon was charged to receive him in a new way. The supreme work of Christianity is to transform men, so that out of their transformed lives shall come the transformation of all social conditions, and the victories of righteousness and of love.

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