

Philemon I. 4-6

by St. John Chrysostom

St. John Chrysostom's sermon on Philemon emphasizes the transformative power of love and humility in Christian relationships and the importance of effective faith communication.

Scripture: Luke 17:7, Romans 14:8, Philippians 3:13, Philemon 1:4, James 2:26

Topics: "Christian Humility", "Forgiveness"

Description

John Chrysostom preaches on the importance of humility and forgiveness, using the example of Paul's letter to Philemon regarding Onesimus. Chrysostom emphasizes the need for masters to show compassion and forgiveness towards their servants, not being harsh or proud, but rather humble and willing to pardon offenses. He highlights the power of love and the transformation it brings, urging listeners to imitate Christ's love and humility in their relationships. Chrysostom encourages a deep reflection on one's actions, motivations, and the genuine practice of humility, reminding believers that true humility is not for self-glorification but for the glory of God.

Transcript

I thank my God, making mention of you always in my prayers, Hearing of your love and faith, which you have towards the Lord Jesus, and toward all saints. That the communication of your faith may become effectual by the acknowledging [in the knowledge] of every good thing which is in us, in Christ Jesus.

He does not immediately at the commencement ask the favor, but having first admired the man, and having praised him for his good actions, and having shown no small proof of his love, that he always made mention of him in his prayers, and having said that many are refreshed by him, and that he is obedient and complying in all things; then he puts it last of all, by this particularly putting him to the blush. For if others obtain the things which they ask, much more Paul. If coming before others, he was worthy to obtain, much more when he comes after others, and asks a thing not pertaining to himself, but in behalf of another. Then, that he may not seem to have written on this account only, and that no one may say, If it were not for Onesimus you would not have written, see how he assigns other causes also of his Epistle. In the first place manifesting his love, then also desiring that a lodging may be prepared for him.

Hearing, he says, of your love.

This is wonderful, and much greater than if being present he had seen it when he was present. For it is plain that from its being excessive it had become manifest, and had reached even to Paul. And yet the

distance between Rome and Phrygia was not small. For he seems to have been there from the mention of Archippus. For the Colossians were of Phrygia, writing to whom he said, When this Epistle is read among you, cause that it be read also in the Church of the Laodiceans, and that you likewise read the Epistle from Laodicea. Colossians 4:16 And this is a city of Phrygia.

I pray, he says, that the communication of your faith may become effectual in the knowledge of every good thing which is in Christ Jesus. Do you see him first giving, before he receives, and before he asks a favor himself bestowing a much greater one of his own? That the communication of your faith, he says, may become effectual by the acknowledging of every good thing which is in you in Christ Jesus; that is, that you may attain all virtue, that nothing may be deficient. For so faith becomes effectual, when it is accompanied with works. For without works faith is dead. James 2:26 And he has not said, Your faith, but the communication of your faith, connecting it with himself, and showing that it is one body, and by this particularly making him ashamed to refuse. If you are a partaker, he says, with respect to the faith, you ought to communicate also with respect to other things.

Ver. 7. For we have [I had] great joy and consolation in your love, because the bowels [hearts] of the Saints are refreshed by you, brother.

Nothing so shames us into giving, as to bring forward the kindnesses bestowed on others, and particularly when a man is more entitled to respect than they. And he has not said, If you do it to others, much more to me; but he has insinuated the same thing, though he has contrived to do it in another and a more gracious manner.

I had joy, that is, you have given me confidence from the things which you have done to others. And consolation, that is, we are not only gratified, but we are also comforted. For they are members of us. If then there ought to be such an agreement, that in the refreshing of any others who are in affliction, though we obtain nothing, we should be delighted on their account, as if it were one body that was benefited; much more if you shall refresh us also. And he has not said, Because you yield, and compliest, but even more vehemently and emphatically, because the bowels of the Saints, as if it were for a darling child fondly loved by its parents, so that this love and affection shows that he also is exceedingly beloved by them.

Ver. 8. Wherefore, though I might be much bold in Christ to enjoin you that which is convenient [befitting].

Observe how cautious he is, lest any of the things which were spoken even from exceeding love should so strike the hearer, as that he should be hurt. For this reason before he says, to enjoin you, since it was offensive, although, as spoken out of love, it was more proper to soothe him, yet nevertheless from an excess of delicacy, he as it were corrects it by saying, Having confidence, by which he implies that Philemon was a great man, that is You have given confidence to us. And not only that, but adding the expression in Christ, by which he shows that it was not that he was more illustrious in the world, not that he was more powerful, but it was on account of his faith in Christ -- then he also adds, to enjoin you, and not that only, but that which is convenient, that is, a reasonable action. And see out of how many things he brings proof for this. You do good to others, he says, and to me, and for Christ's sake, and that the thing is reasonable, and that love gives, wherefore also he adds,

Ver. 9. Yet for love's sake, I rather beseech you.

As if he had said, I know indeed that I can effect it by commanding with much authority, from things which have already taken place. But because I am very solicitous about this matter, I beseech you. He shows both these things at once; that he has confidence in him, for he commands him; and that he is exceedingly concerned about the matter, wherefore he beseeches him.

Being such an one, he says, as Paul the aged. Strange! How many things are here to shame him into compliance! Paul, from the quality of his person, from his age, because he was old, and from what was more just than all, because he was also a prisoner of Jesus Christ.

For who would not receive with open arms a combatant who had been crowned? Who seeing him bound for Christ's sake, would not have granted him ten thousand favors? By so many considerations having previously soothed his mind, he has not immediately introduced the name, but defers making so great a request. For you know what are the minds of masters towards slaves that have run away; and particularly when they have done this with robbery, even if they have good masters, how their anger is increased. This anger then having taken all these pains to soothe, and having first persuaded him readily to serve him in anything whatever, and having prepared his soul to all obedience, then he introduces his request, and says, I beseech you, and with the addition of praises, for my son whom I have begotten in my bonds.

Again the chains are mentioned to shame him into compliance, and then the name. For he has not only extinguished his anger, but has caused him to be delighted. For I would not have called him my son, he says, if he were not especially profitable. What I called Timothy, that I call him also. And repeatedly showing his affection, he urges him by the very period of his new birth, I have begotten him in my bonds, he says, so that on this account also he was worthy to obtain much honor, because he was begotten in his very conflicts, in his trials in the cause of Christ.

Onesimus,

Ver. 11. Which in time past was to you unprofitable.

See how great is his prudence, how he confesses the man's faults, and thereby extinguishes his anger. I know, he says, that he was unprofitable.

But now he will be profitable to you and to me.

He has not said he will be useful to you, lest he should contradict it, but he has introduced his own person, that his hopes may seem worthy of credit, But now, he says, profitable to you and to me. For if he was profitable to Paul, who required so great strictness, much more would he be so to his master.

Ver. 12. Whom I have sent again to you.

By this also he has quenched his anger, by delivering him up. For masters are then most enraged, when they are entreated for the absent, so that by this very act he mollified him the more.

Ver. 12. Thou therefore receive him, that is my own bowels.

And again he has not given the bare name, but uses with it a word that might move him, which is more affectionate than son. He has said, son, he has said, I have begotten him, so that it was probable he would love him much, because he begot him in his trials. For it is manifest that we are most inflamed with affection for those children, who have been born to us in dangers which we have escaped, as when the

Scripture says, Woe, Barochabel! and again when Rachel names Benjamin, the son of my sorrow. Genesis 35:18

Thou therefore, he says, receive him, that is my own bowels. He shows the greatness of his affection. He has not said, Take him back, he has not said, Be not angry, but receive him; that is, he is worthy not only of pardon, but of honor. Why? Because he has become the son of Paul.

Ver. 13. Whom I would have retained with me, that in your stead he might have ministered unto me in the bonds of the Gospel.

Do you see after how much previous preparation, he has at length brought him honorably before his master, and observe with how much wisdom he has done this. See for how much he makes him answerable, and how much he honors the other. You have found, he says, a way by which you may through him repay your service to me. Here he shows that he has considered his advantage more than that of his slave, and that he respects him exceedingly.

Ver. 14. But without your mind, he says, would I do nothing; that your benefit should not be, as it were, of necessity, but willingly.

This particularly flatters the person asked, when the thing being profitable in itself, it is brought out with his concurrence. For two good effects are produced thence, the one person gains, and the other is rendered more secure. And he has not said, That it should not be of necessity, but as it were of necessity. For I knew, he says, that not having learned it, but coming to know it at once, you would not have been angry, but nevertheless out of an excess of consideration, that it should not be as it were of necessity.

Ver. 15, 16. For perhaps he was therefore parted from you for a season that you should have him for ever; no longer as a bond-servant.

He has well said, perhaps, that the master may yield. For since the flight arose from perverseness, and a corrupt mind, and not from such intention, he has said, perhaps. And he has not said, therefore he fled, but, therefore he was separated, by a more fair sounding expression softening him the more. And he has not said, He separated himself, but, he was separated. For it was not his own arrangement that he should depart either for this purpose or for that. Which also Joseph says, in making excuse for his brethren, For God did send me hither Genesis 45:5, that is, He made use of their wickedness for a good end. Therefore, he says, he was parted for a season. Thus he contracts the time, acknowledges the offense, and turns it all to a providence. That you should receive him, he says, for ever, not for the present season only, but even for the future, that you might always have him, no longer a slave, but more honorable than a slave. For you will have a slave abiding with you, more well-disposed than a brother, so that you have gained both in time, and in the quality of your slave. For hereafter he will not run away. That you should receive him, he says, for ever, that is, have him again.

No longer as a bond-servant, but more than a bond-servant, a brother beloved, especially to me.

You have lost a slave for a short time, but you will find a brother for ever, not only your brother, but mine also. Here also there is much virtue. But if he is my brother, you also will not be ashamed of him. By calling him his son, he has shown his natural affection; and by calling him his brother, his great good will for him, and his equality in honor.

Moral. These things are not written without an object, but that we masters may not despair of our servants, nor press too hard on them, but may learn to pardon the offenses of such servants, that we may not be always severe, that we may not from their servitude be ashamed to make them partakers with us in all things when they are good. For if Paul was not ashamed to call one his son, his own bowels, his brother, his beloved, surely we ought not to be ashamed. And why do I say Paul? The Master of Paul is not ashamed to call our servants His own brethren; and are we ashamed? See how He honors us; He calls our servants His own brethren, friends, and fellow-heirs. See to what He has descended! What therefore having done, shall we have accomplished our whole duty? We shall never in any wise do it; but to whatever degree of humility we have come, the greater part of it is still left behind. For consider, whatever you doest, you do to a fellow-servant, but your Master has done it to your servants. Hear and shudder! Never be elated at your humility!

Perhaps you laugh at the expression, as if humility could puff up. But be not surprised at it, it puffs up, when it is not genuine. How, and in what manner? When it is practiced to gain the favor of men, and not of God, that we may be praised, and be high-minded. For this also is diabolical. For as many are vainglorious on account of their not being vainglorious, so are they elated on account of their humbling themselves, by reason of their being high-minded. For instance, a brother has come, or even a servant you have received him, you have washed his feet; immediately you think highly of yourself. I have done, you say, what no other has done. I have achieved humility. How then may any one continue in humility? If he remembers the command of Christ, which says, When you shall have done all things, say, We are unprofitable servants. Luke 17:10 And again the Teacher of the world, saying, I count not myself to have apprehended. Philippians 3:13 He who has persuaded himself that he has done no great thing, however many things he may have done, he alone can be humble-minded, he who thinks that he has not reached perfection.

Many are elated on account of their humility; but let not us be so affected. Have you done any act of humility? Be not proud of it, otherwise all the merit of it is lost. Such was the Pharisee, he was puffed up because he gave his tythes to the poor, and he lost all the merit of it. Luke 18:12 But not so the publican. Hear Paul again saying, I know nothing by myself, yet am I not hereby justified. 1 Corinthians 4:4 Do you see that he does not exalt himself, but by every means abases and humbles himself, and that too when he had arrived at the very summit. And the Three Children were in the fire, and in the midst of the furnace, and what said they? We have sinned and committed iniquity with our fathers. Song of Songs 5:6, in the Septuagint; Daniel 3:29-30; 5:16 This it is to have a contrite heart; on this account they could say, Nevertheless in a contrite heart and a humble spirit let us be accepted. Thus even after they had fallen into the furnace they were exceedingly humbled, even more so than they were before. For when they saw the miracle that was wrought, thinking themselves unworthy of that deliverance, they were brought lower in humility. For when we are persuaded that we have received great benefits beyond our desert, then we are particularly grieved. And yet what benefit had they received beyond their desert? They had given themselves up to the furnace; they had been taken captive for the sins of others; for they were still young; and they murmured not, nor were indignant, nor did they say, What good is it to us that we serve God, or what advantage have we in worshiping Him? This man is impious, and has become our lord. We are punished with the idolatrous by an idolatrous king. We have been led into captivity. We are deprived of our country, our freedom, all our paternal goods, we have become prisoners and slaves, we are enslaved to a barbarous king. None of these things did they say. But what? We have sinned and committed iniquity. And not for themselves but for others they offer prayers. Because, say they, You have delivered us to a hateful and a wicked king. Again, Daniel, being a second time cast into the pit, said, For God has remembered me. Wherefore should He not remember you, O Daniel, when you glorified Him before the king, saying,

Not for any wisdom that I have? Daniel 2:30 But when you were cast into the den of lions, because thou did not obey that most wicked decree, wherefore should He not remember you? For this very reason surely should He. Were you not cast into it on His account? Yea truly, he says, but I am a debtor for many things. And if he said such things after having displayed so great virtue, what should we say after this? But hear what David says, If He thus say, I have no delight in you, behold here am I, let Him do to me as seems good unto Him. 2 Samuel 15:26 And yet he had an infinite number of good things to speak of. And Eli also says, It is the Lord: let Him do what seems Him good. 1 Samuel 3:18

This is the part of well-disposed servants, not only in His mercies, but in His corrections, and in punishments wholly to submit to Him. For how is it not absurd, if we bear with masters beating their servants, knowing that they will spare them, because they are their own; and yet suppose that God in punishing will not spare? This also Paul has intimated, saying, Whether we live or die, we are the Lord's. Romans 14:8 A man, we say, wishes not his property to be diminished, he knows how he punishes, he is punishing his own servants. But surely no one of us spares more than He Who brought us into being out of nothing, Who makes the sun to rise, Who causes rain; Who breathed our life into us, Who gave His own Son for us.

But as I said before, and on which account I have said all that I have said, let us be humble-minded as we ought, let us be moderate as we ought. Let it not be to us an occasion of being puffed up. Are you humble, and humbler than all men? Be not high-minded on that account, neither reproach others, lest you lose your boast. For this very cause you are humble, that you may be delivered from the madness of pride; if therefore through your humility you fall into that madness, it were better for you not to be humble. For hear Paul saying, Sin works death in me by that which is good, that sin by the commandment might become exceeding sinful. Romans 7:13 When it enters into your thought to admire yourself because you are humble, consider your Master, to what He descended, and you will no longer admire yourself, nor praise yourself, but will deride yourself as having done nothing. Consider yourself altogether to be a debtor. Whatever you have done, remember that parable, Which of you having a servant...will say unto him, when he has come in, Sit down to meat?...I say unto you, Nay...but stay and serve me. From Luke 17:7-8 Do we return thanks to our servants, for waiting upon us? By no means. Yet God is thankful to us, who serve not Him, but do that which is expedient for ourselves.

But let not us be so affected, as if He owed us thanks, that He may owe us the more, but as if we were discharging a debt. For the matter truly is a debt, and all that we do is of debt. For if when we purchase slaves with our money, we wish them to live altogether for us, and whatever they have to have it for ourselves, how much more must it be so with Him, who brought us out of nothing into being, who after this bought us with His precious Blood, who paid down such a price for us as no one would endure to pay for his own son, who shed His own Blood for us? If therefore we had ten thousand souls, and should lay them all down for Him, should we make Him an equal return? By no means. And why? Because He did this, owing us nothing, but the whole was a matter of grace. But we henceforth are debtors: and being God Himself, He became a servant, and not being subject to death, subjected Himself to death in the flesh. We, if we do not lay down our lives for Him, by the law of nature must certainly lay them down, and a little later shall be separated from it, however unwillingly. So also in the case of riches, if we do not bestow them for His sake, we shall render them up from necessity at our end. So it is also with humility. Although we are not humble for His sake, we shall be made humble by tribulations, by calamities, by over-ruling powers. Do you see therefore how great is the grace! He has not said, What great things do the Martyrs do? Although they die not for Me, they certainly will die. But He owns Himself much indebted to them,

because they voluntarily resign that which in the course of nature they were about to resign shortly against their will. He has not said, What great thing do they, who give away their riches? Even against their will they will have to surrender them. But He owns Himself much indebted to them too, and is not ashamed to confess before all that He, the Master, is nourished by His slaves.

For this also is the glory of a Master, to have grateful slaves. And this is the glory of a Master, that He should thus love His slaves. And this is the glory of a Master, to claim for His own what is theirs. And this is the glory of a Master, not to be ashamed to confess them before all. Let us therefore be stricken with awe at this so great love of Christ. Let us be inflamed with this love-potion. Though a man be low and mean, yet if we hear that he loves us, we are above all things warmed with love towards him, and honor him exceedingly. And do we then love? And when our Master loves us so much, we are not excited? Let us not, I beseech you, let us not be so indifferent with regard to the salvation of our souls, but let us love Him according to our power, and let us spend all upon His love, our life, our riches, our glory, everything, with delight, with joy, with alacrity, not as rendering anything to Him, but to ourselves. For such is the law of those who love. They think that they are receiving favors, when they are suffering wrong for the sake of their beloved. Therefore let us be so affected towards our Lord, that we also may partake of the good things to come in Christ Jesus our Lord.

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