

# *Love's Superlatives*

## *(A Survey of Philemon)*

An Expository Sermon

by Avon Malone

How enjoyable it is to read letters or personal correspondence! *The Letters and Sermons of T. B. Larimore* by F. D. Srygley is fascinating because of its personal touch. I have found the letters as interesting as the sermons. There is something about looking at that correspondence and envisioning the situation.

The books of the New Testament are documents given under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. And yet, they are letters. Paul, for example, follows a letter form which was very common in the first century.

Philemon, in many ways, may be the most personal of all the letters Paul wrote. It is such a brief little letter, containing only twenty-five verses. In it Paul is dealing with a matter of great delicacy and difficulty. At least two individuals might be seriously offended by what he would have to say. And yet, the letter no doubt accomplishes its purpose in that the principle characters in the narrative were not offended but rather were encouraged by the confidence and commendation Paul directs toward them.

The essence of this great letter can be summarized by four great qualities or attributes of love which we can call "Love's Superlatives."

### **I. LOVE HAS A MINISTRY THAT SERVES THE WORST.**

Philemon shows that love has a ministry that serves the worst. Onesimus was a slave. William Barclay and other writers suggest that there were sixty million slaves in the first century Roman Empire. The figure is staggering. This was one reason that any slave rebellion was put down immediately. The number of slaves posed a threat. Had they ever been able to revolt in any kind of united way, they could have taken control of the Roman Empire.

A slave owner could punish a runaway slave with impunity, without fear of chastisement or legal prosecution. Anything he might do, would be accepted and would be outside the scope of

any legal or judicial action.

Onesimus was a runaway slave at a time when slavery, though wrong and indefensible, was an existing social institution. At this time a slave was looked upon as a living tool.

As you look carefully at the letter, there are indications that this runaway had absconded with goods or funds (vv. 18, 19). It might be also argued that he had robbed Philemon of a period of service during his absence. Onesimus, therefore, was socially, personally, and in every way without hope and without excuse. Under the practices of the ancient world, he was in danger of losing his life should he be apprehended and returned to his master. He was from Phrygia in Asia Minor where slaves were particularly lowly regarded. But Paul reaches out to him.

One writer, Paul Minnear, suggests that it could be that Onesimus for a time was incarcerated in the same place where Paul was a prisoner. I don't know. But somehow contact was made. The main points in the story behind the narrative are fairly clear. Philemon was apparently a convert of Paul and, at this time, resided in Colossae. He was a man given to hospitality and, seemingly, a man of some means. He owned a slave by the name of Onesimus who gathered together some goods or funds and ran away. He was converted by Paul. Paul described his conversion beautifully and almost poetically when he said, "Whom I have begotten in my bonds," Now Paul sends him back.

This little letter is a kind of baptismal certificate. But it is also much more. It is an appeal to the slaveowner to receive this slave now as a brother in Christ. The main purpose of the letter is the reconciliation of two who are now brethren in Christ. The life of one is in jeopardy under the common custom and practice of the day. Paul reaches out to this one who was a slave and a runaway. In the view of the world, Onesimus was the epitome, we might say, of the worst. But love has a ministry that serves the worst.

Love has a hem in its garment  
that trails in the very dust.  
It can reach the stains of the streets and lanes  
because it can, it must.

Jesus did not say, "Go preach the gospel to every middle-class Anglo-Saxon with a good moral reputation." Somebody put it, "That is the way the revised practice version reads." But that is an incorrect translation. Love has a ministry that serves the worst. A runaway slave who was socially without status, who was personally without hope, who, in accord with the practice of that day, was really fleeing for his life, was the very one to whom Paul reaches out with the desire of sharing with him the gospel of Christ. We need to learn and relearn the truth that we are debtors to the Greeks, to the barbarians, to the wise, and to the foolish.

For ye are all sons of God, through faith, in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ did put on Christ. There can be neither Jew nor Greek, there can be neither bond nor free, there can be no male and female; for ye are all one man in Christ Jesus. And if ye are Christ's, then are ye Abraham's seed, heirs according to promise (Galatians 3:26-29).

Paul is not saying that these distinctions are obliterated. He is saying that justification is in no way related to one's race, sex or any other such consideration. In Christ there is a oneness and a unity. Love has a ministry that serves the worst.

## II. LOVE HAS A COURTESY THAT GAINS THE MOST.

Secondly, Philemon declares that love has a courtesy that gains the most. Charles Eerdman called Philemon, "A model of Christian courtesy." Paul, guided by the Spirit, deals skillfully, lovingly, and kindly with a very delicate situation. Had he handled this matter in a crude, rude, coarse way, he would have offended Philemon and even antagonized the slave who was now going back to his master. But he speaks in such a way as to win, not only the approbation, but also the full cooperation of Philemon. No doubt he wrote in such a way as to cause the runaway to understand that Paul had confidence in him.

In verses 4 and 5 he commends Philemon: "I thank my God always, making mention of thee in my prayers, hearing of thy love, and of the

faith which thou hast toward the Lord Jesus, . . ." He speaks of his fellowship of the faith and of how the saints had been refreshed through Philemon in verse 7. All of this is a commendation, genuine and sincere. This is love showing the courtesy that gains the most.

Love's courtesy is seen again in verses 8 and 9: "Wherefore, though I have all boldness in Christ to enjoin thee that which is befitting, yet for love's sake I rather beseech, being such a one as Paul the aged, and now a prisoner also of Christ Jesus." Paul could have made an appeal to apostolic authority, to his relationship to the Lord in the role of a special emissary. But he didn't. Rather than apostolic command, rather than enjoining, Paul said, "I beseech." He said, "I am simply making a plea." He makes his plea, not as an apostle, but as "Paul the aged." Paul uses the word *presbutas*, It is akin to *presbuteros*, the word for "elder." It means one who is older, Paul the aged. I don't know exactly how old he might have been, but he makes reference to his age. He also refers to the fact that he is a prisoner of Christ.

In verse 14 he says, "But without thy mind I would do nothing; . . ." Paul is saying, "I am not going to arbitrarily step in and intrude upon this situation. I want whatever you do to be of your own free will." This is really very important because, for it to really matter spiritually and work to our own maturing and to the glory of God, it must be done out of personal conviction and not some kind of external compulsion. It needs to be of our own free will if there is going to be "any fruit that abounds to our account." Paul, with great courtesy, with a very evident kind of tact and regard for the volition and position of Philemon, said, "Without thy mind I would do nothing; that thy goodness should not be as of necessity, but of free will." Love has a courtesy that gains the most.

In 1 Peter 3:8, as the King James translates the verse, Peter says, "Be ye courteous." In 1 Corinthians 13:4, 5, Paul says, "Love suffereth long, and is kind; love envieth not; love vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up, doth not behave itself unseemly, . . ." Notice, he makes the very statement which we have just observed: "Love doth not behave itself unseemly, . . ." The NIV rendered this phrase, "Love is not rude."

I am aware that in the thirteenth chapter of Acts Paul spoke very sharply to Elymas, the sorcerer. You may remember the very biting terms and tones used by Paul on that occasion. In the eighth chapter of Acts when Simon the sorcerer wanted to buy the power of the apostles, Peter told him, "For I see that you are in the gall of bitterness and in the bond of iniquity. You have neither part nor lot in the matter. Your money perish with you." He speaks rather sharply. We have to concede that there are situations in which love will so express itself. But in Philemon Paul is writing to a *brother* and love believes all things and does not behave itself unseemly. Paul employs a courtesy that gains the most.

A great practical lesson appears here. When Paul converses with a good brother like Philemon, even though a social practice and institution is involved, he uses great respect, courtesy, and esteem. That is characteristic of love.

The late F. W. Boreman wrote of Henry Drummond that he was a master at engaging people in conversation and sharing genuinely in their triumphs and sorrows and talking with genuine interest, courtesy, and gentility about whatever was of interest to them. But the purpose in this was in order that he might say something to them about Jesus. We would do well to remember this truth. Unless we are dealing with an Elymas or a Simon the sorcerer, or unless the occasion obviously demands the kind of rebuke that love sometimes employs, characteristically love has a courtesy that gains the most.

### **III. LOVE HAS AN HONESTY THAT WILL NOT TAKE ADVANTAGE IN THE LEAST.**

Philemon also teaches that love has an honesty that will not take advantage in the least. Paul could have reasoned: "This man is a runaway slave but slavery is not right. So I will send him on his way." Onesimus could have had similar thoughts. But wrongs needed to be made right. It seems that Onesimus, took funds from Philemon and had been gone for a period of time. Thus, he had deprived his owner of money and of service. Though the institution itself ultimately crumples under the power of the message of our Lord, it was an existent institution then. Paul understands that in this context, in

this historical and social context, the only right thing to do is to seek to right wrongs. So, he sends Onesimus back. He said, "If he hath wronged thee at all or oweth thee aught, put that to mine account." We aren't winking at slavery, but wrongs are to be righted, and love has an honesty that will not take advantage in the least.

In 1850, when slavery prevailed in this country, there was the fugitive slave law that required a man who had apprehended a runaway slave to return him to his master. The situation in the first century would seem to be somewhat similar. Ethically and morally in that context Paul knows the right thing for Onesimus to do is to go back and right the wrongs. Paul said, "I am ready to get involved in this even with my pocketbook." We are not going to wink at the wrongs. We are going to take care of them because love has an honesty that will not take advantage in the least.

The author of *The Christian in Business* tells about a college student who worked for him a short time and then moved away. One day he received a letter from him which read, "I handled the punching of the clock in such a way that I defrauded you of time that was rightfully yours. I believe that it would come to something like sixty dollars that I cheated you out of. Enclosed is a check to cover a part of the amount and I will complete payment as quickly as possible." This author didn't send the check back. He accepted it. He understood that love has an honesty that will not take advantage in the least. Love seeks to right wrong.

### **IV. LOVE HAS AN EXPECTANCY THAT LOOKS FOR THE BEST.**

Fourth, Philemon says love has an expectancy that looks for the best. Several parts of this letter are wonderfully winsome and warm, beautiful and gracious. Verse 21 says, "Having confidence in thine obedience I write unto thee, knowing that thou wilt do even beyond what I say." Now I am not sure that I know what that really means. I know what Paul is asking him to do because that is spelled out in the letter. He wants him to "receive him as a brother." In the cultural context of that day, a slaveowner could put him to death, flog him unmercifully, or torture him. But Paul says, "I want you to receive him as a brother."

What does Paul mean when he says, "I know you will do even more than what I have asked"? J. B. Lightfoot says that emancipation trembles on his pen, but he never speaks the word. I don't know. I know he doesn't speak the word. One truth, though, I do know for sure. He believes that Philemon will do everything he is asked. He believes that Philemon will receive back the slave and will even go beyond the warm reception of Onesimus the runaway slave. It is interesting how Paul plays on the name Onesimus. Onesimus means "helpful or profitable." Paul says, "Onesimus was unprofitable to you but now he is profitable to you and me." Paul is not going to keep him because love has an honesty that will not take advantage in the least. Though he could render service to Paul in his imprisonment, the right thing to do is send him back. The right thing to do is to meet whatever obligation is his. Paul says to Philemon, "I want you to know that I have the utmost confidence in you. I believe that you are going to do everything I have asked and more."

Have you ever said to your child, "Well, this is what you are to do but I doubt that you will do it." It is pretty doubtful that it will get done if that is the way you expressed it. I believe it was Winston Churchill who said, "The best way to help a man gain a virtue is to impute it to him." In other words, give him the advantage of your doubts. Now certainly we must let our speech and words be without guile (1 Peter 3:10), but as far as we can we need to have this great, grand, expectant, and magnanimous attitude that Paul shows: "Philemon, I believe you will do everything that I have asked and more." Love has an expectancy that looks for the best because love believes all things, Paul doesn't mean that love is blind and gullible, but he does mean that love is not suspicious. Love is inexhaustibly hopeful and expectant. It looks for and expects the very best.

### CONCLUSION

I wish I could somehow paint a picture of this runaway going back, bearing this little letter, and Philemon of Colossae coming out to meet him. There must have been a measure of apprehension, uncertainty, and fear stabbing at the heart of the slave as he returned. He couldn't help but know the practices common in a cruel, cold, first century Roman Empire. But Philemon rushes to him. I see it closing in an embrace.

Though different socially in terms of the practice of that world, they are now one in Christ. Standing on ground that is absolutely level at the foot of the cross, they are one in Christ. "And he has been parted from you," Paul said, "for a season, that you might have him now more than a servant, a brother for ever."

Have we really demonstrated this great love? We haven't even used the word *agape*, but somehow I believe there are truths in this letter that help to define that great word. We might have had a tendency to shrink back from this runaway slave. But Paul reached out to him. In the warmth of genuine concern, the runaway was led to Jesus and to the new birth. This little letter is a model of Christian courtesy.

There is a cross back of this letter, and there is a cross back of the uniting of all men, then and now, who would really be one in Christ (Ephesians 2:16).

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## ILLUSTRATIONS

### *Why Some Churches Are Worried*

A case study published by *U.S. News and World Report* indicates relatively smooth sailing for conservative fellowships, but tough sledding for liberals in the next decade. The findings were as follows:

	Conservatives	Liberals
Relate religious experiences . . . . .	89%	43%
Believe religion is the answer . . . . .	84%	43%
Attend church weekly . . . . .	68%	25%
Give as much as \$7.50 weekly . . . . .	50%	18%

The conclusion of the study was this: The majority of the liberals have adopted the theology of the New Reformation (moving away from the established religious views) but at the same time have stopped attending worship, participating in church activities, contributing, praying, and are uninformed about religion. Liberal fellowships are in trouble and worried. God's prophet has the answer, "Thus saith the Lord, stand in the way and see, and ask for the old paths, where is the good way, and walk therein, and ye shall find rest for your souls" (Jeremiah 6:16). The old paths provide the panacea for troubled churches. The answer is so obvious we have overlooked it.