

“By This They Will Know!” (vv. 17-20)

“If then you regard me a partner, accept him as you would me. But if he has wronged you in any way, or owes you anything, charge that to my account; I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand, I will repay it (lest I should mention to you that you owe to me even your own self as well). Yes, brother, let me benefit from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in Christ” (vv. 17-20).

The lesson’s title is a dead giveaway to the topic—brotherly love, the ideal of Christianity (John 13:34, 35). Of all the traits instilled in the daily life of the obedient saint (rejoicing, hope, peace, joy, kindness, etc.), the trait of love is most prominent. This trait is the most beautiful and rewarding. Perhaps it is safe to assert that this trait is really the basic building block for all others (cf. 1 Corinthians 13:13). The evidence of brotherly love is so evident that it cannot be hid.

The attitude of brotherly love is well expressed by the following incident. One was asked for whom he labored the least. He answered, “For the ones I love.” Then he was asked for whom he labored the hardest, and he replied, “For the ones I love.” Such is the beauty of love’s attitude—it does the most and yet thinks the least of its actions!

Surprisingly, one of the clearest lessons on this marvelous trait is found in the shortest book of the New Testament. In verses 17 through 20, Paul reaches the objective of his letter—he will ask Philemon to accept Onesimus back without any ill feelings. Thus the stage was set for an appeal for brotherly love and an immediate practice of that godly virtue. Philemon had obeyed

the “gospel of love,” and now he was asked to practice that “gospel of love” in his life.

Although love is a topic easily discussed, it is often neglected. There is a discrepancy between what we know and what we do! Because of this problem, we need to look at how Philemon was encouraged to practice love. Paul indicates that the manner of Philemon’s practice of love would indicate to all around him how dedicated to God he was. Such is compatible with Christ’s statement in John 13, “By the practice of love all will know you are my disciples!”

THE DEMONSTRATION OF CHRISTIAN LOVE

The virtue of Christian love will be demonstrated when it is possessed. Such a demonstration is described as follows . . .

First, there will be an understanding of one another as a “partner” in the faith (v. 17). Paul mentioned this concept first showing that here was a way Philemon could demonstrate love. The term “partnership” refers to an intimate friend, a comrade. It indicates that you are in a relationship with another that involves mutual responsibilities—each is depending on the other. This is similar to being “yoked” together in a common task (cf. Philippians 4:3).

By using this term Paul implied that “partners” are considerate and sensitive to one another. Such is a true trait of Christian love. Believers are “partners” with one another—they are united in service, ideas, hopes, and aims. It would be disastrous for business partners to

quarrel and quibble, to hold grudges and nurture resentment, and such is true regarding our “partnership” with brethren! When we fail to nurture the concept of “partnership” with one another, we are headed for disaster!

*When we fail to
nurture the concept of “partner-
ship” with one another,
we are headed for
disaster!*

The secret of Christian unity is understanding this “partnership.” All are “yoked” together and the only way to succeed is to pull together as one! This was the urging of Paul to Philemon—“You and Onesimus are now partners! Make the partnership work by lovingly considering each other as a vital partner in the faith!”

Second, there will be “hospitality” that welcomes newest members with the same eager affection as older members are welcomed (v. 17b). Philemon was about to meet a new brother, and Paul urged him to greet his newest brother exactly as he would greet the apostle. Can you imagine the reception such a suggestion would have had upon those who are tied to the world? Their response would have been a sharp rejection! But not Philemon. Only Christian love would provide the motive for such a greeting!

The word “receive” refers to more than greeting with a hearty welcome. It is opening the heart; taking into friendship and fellowship. (Cf. Romans 14:3; 15:7.) It was impossible for Philemon to do this with a resentful or “standoffish” attitude! Notice that Philemon’s greeting of Onesimus was to be “as” he would welcome Paul. There was to be no hesitation when it came to welcoming a fellow brother. Understanding that they were brothers in the Lord should immediately kindle the affection of brotherly love (Hebrews 13:1-3).

How does the modern church measure up against this standard of “hospitality”? Whenever brothers or sisters come to the assembly, they deserve the same affection that is demonstrated toward other brethren. If a congregation

shows degrees and distinction, it is a tragic adulteration of the great virtue of brotherly love! (James 2:1-10).

The essence of Christian hospitality is portrayed in a beautiful way by an Egyptian hieroglyphic. The picture of love is a naked child, with a heart in his hand, giving honey to a bee without wings. The child represents humility in love; the heart in the hand represents the cheerfulness of love; giving honey to a bee without wings pictures the worthiness and helplessness of the object loved.

Third, there is a “willingness” to forgive and to suffer personal wrong for a fellow Christian (vv. 18, 19). This is the “stumbling block” for many. Many find it easy to accept another as a partner (although it may be as a “distant” partner), and there will even be a welcome extended. But when wrong has been committed, the fire of love is extinguished!

This was the supreme test of Philemon’s love. Would he be willing to forgive Onesimus? Philemon’s response was made even harder by the fact that he was to be *eager* in forgiving Onesimus! In presenting the reasons why Philemon should be eager to forgive Onesimus, Paul focused upon a point that was often stressed by our Lord—one who is forgiven *much* ought to be eager to forgive *little*! (Cf. Matthew 6:12, 14, 15; 18:21ff.)

Paul encouraged Philemon to forgive Onesimus for two reasons. First, Paul was willing to stand in Onesimus’ place. Paul asked Philemon to write up a bill for what was owed and put it on Paul’s “account.” This word referred to a legal debt, a justified bill. Thus Paul demonstrated the example of self-sacrifice. Philemon, seeing Paul’s willingness to sacrifice would be prompted to emulate the example and freely forgive Onesimus. The second maneuver of Paul was to remind Philemon about the great “debt” he owed the apostle. Even as rich as he was, Philemon could never repay the debt; it had to be forgiven. The “debt” was the benefits of the gospel. How could he repay those benefits? All that made life glorious for Philemon had come from the gospel, and that could never be repaid! Philemon had received an “account” he could not pay, but that account had been settled and the “debt” satisfied. Having freely received grace he should be willing to freely bestow grace!

This demonstration of Christian love is beautiful. The attitude toward brethren who have been overtaken by sin will reveal much about the fervency of love within our hearts. I like the following statement of John Newton because it clearly speaks to the need for all to develop a willingness to forebear and forgive. "For my part, if my pocket was full of stones, I have no right to throw one at the greatest backslider upon earth. I have either done as bad or worse than he, or I certainly should if the Lord had left me a little to myself; for I am made of just the same materials: if there be any difference, it is wholly of grace."

There can be a greater debt than stolen goods or a runaway slave—the debt of an unwillingness to forgive! We are obligated to develop a willingness to welcome back the Christian who has made a mistake. Too frequently we fail to welcome and hold the returning prodigal at "arm's length." Our willingness is hindered by suspicion, and trust is never extended again. We can believe that God has forgiven him, but we find it difficult to forgive him. Let us take to heart the fact that Paul urges Philemon to remember—Christian love is willing to forgive and eagerly seeks opportunities to do such!

*Too frequently
we . . . hold the returning prodigal
at "arm's length."*

Fourth, there will be an "eagerness" to associate with one another because of the mutual benefits shared in fellowship (v. 20). Paul knew Philemon's response even as he wrote (v. 20), and thus he knew of the joy that would come. Philemon's loving response would cause brethren to be "refreshed." A real delight would provide strength for them to endure life's trials. Love is eager to be with other brethren. Perhaps the best opportunity for this aspect of love to be demonstrated is in attendance at the assemblies and gatherings of brethren. An indication of the lack of love in some brethren is evident in the low attendance of worship assemblies and failure to attend various fellowship functions which are designed to stimulate and deepen fellow-

ship among brethren. Let all beware of the danger of allowing our eagerness for fellowship to dwindle and die.

THE PRACTICALITY OF CHRISTIAN LOVE

Christian love is so practical! As you begin to contemplate this attitude, you are soon impressed with its practicality. Notice briefly the following ways it is practical.

"Love" is the only emotion that is able to bind members of Christ's body together! (Cf. Ephesians 4:14-16.) Without love there would be only division, strife, and discord (Colossians 2:2; 1 Corinthians 13:4-7).

"Love" is the critical imperative to personal value! The distraught person who has unsuccessfully tried to commit suicide, bemoans the fact, "No one cares what I do." Without an awareness of love, "I am nothing" (1 Corinthians 13:1-3).

"Love" is the identifying trait of those in God's family! Genetic similarities exist in all offspring, and here is the "dominate trait" of those in God's family. (Cf. Matthew 5:44-48; Colossians 3:12-14; 1 John 4:7-12.) In John Drinkwater's play "Abraham Lincoln," there is a telling dialogue between Lincoln and a certain woman whose zeal for the North had become blind fanaticism, and she was invective against everything about the South. She asked the President if there had been any news of victory. "They lost 2,700 men, and we lost 800." The woman was ecstatic and said, "How splendid!" Lincoln registered deep dismay and repeated slowly, "Thirty-five hundred human lives lost. . ." The woman interrupted, "Oh, you must not talk like that Mr. President. There were only 800 that mattered." Lincoln's shoulders drooped lower, but his tear-rimmed eyes flash as he said with measured emphasis, "Madam, the world is larger than your heart!" Such a thought is suggested in our text.

"Love" is that which enables us to conquer sin. Christianity never permits us to escape the past. It does enable us to face the past and rise above its captivity! Onesimus had to face the facts of his past, but by going back he would rise far above the past! Christian love practiced by Philemon would enable Onesimus to conquer sin! (Cf. Luke 15:17ff.)

The most practical thing about “love” is that it works! It unites, serves, sacrifices, and satisfies. Nothing else can accomplish these things! So great is Christian love that Satan has marshalled the legions of darkness to combat its power. However, once Christian love is found, it is never forgotten! Christian love is beautiful, powerful, and lasting—nothing works like it does! Christian love warmed Philemon’s heart and enabled him to accept Onesimus as a partner. It will reign in our hearts and yield a peace that overcomes all trials.

CONCLUSION

Imagine being in Philemon’s house and observing him as he read the letter. How do you think he reacted? The challenge he was asked to

accept was a great one (v. 17; 1 John 4:7). Forget Philemon for the moment, look into your heart. How do *you* react when faced with the challenge of practicing the “gospel of love”?

The “gospel of love” ought to produce “believers of love.” Philemon was a Christian; he thus could do no less than what God had done in forgiving him. As Philemon practiced “love” toward Onesimus, he would have shown many observers the reality of the power of the gospel in human lives. “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:34, 35). We can do no less!

—John Kachelman

Applying Scripture to Life

What Is the Church?

The church is never a place, but always a people; never a fold but always a flock; never a sacred building but always a believing assembly. The church is you who pray, not where you pray. A structure of brick or marble can no more be a church than your clothes of serge or satin can be you. There is in this world nothing sacred but man, no sanctuary of God but the soul.

Roy L. Laurin,
Acts Life in Action

The Cold Church

The cold church of Ephesus was still working; it still had worth-while deeds to its credit. But it was going ahead largely upon the momentum of the past. A man was out driving, and his car ran out of gasoline. But it did not stop the very instant the tank was empty. It ran for a little while

under the momentum that it had gathered while there was power. But soon the wheels would not turn another time. The church that has lost its first love may be active for a while, but soon its activities will cease.

Clovis Chappell,
Sermons From Revelation

Growing in Christ

A man recently released from prison was having difficulty adjusting to his freedom. He tried this experiment: he took a glass bottle with a distinct shape and crammed it full of wires, some small and some large. After some time had passed he smashed the bottle with a hammer. The result? Most of the wires retained the shape of the bottle. Those wires had to be straightened out, one by one.

The man had established his point: it is possible to be technically free and still retain the

traits of bondage. Even though a man is liberated, he must adjust to his freedom and carefully dismantle the habits of the past.

Erwin W. Lutzer,
How to Say No to a Stubborn Habit

An Assembly of the Lord's People

If this is not a place where tears are understood,

Where do I go to cry?

If this is not a place where my spirit can take wing,

Where do I go to fly?

If this is not a place where my questions can be asked,

Where do I go to seek?

If this is not a place where my feelings can be heard,

Where do I go to speak?

If this is not a place where you will accept me as I am,

Where do I go to be me?

If this is not a place where I can try and learn and grow,

Where can I be . . . just me?