

The Three Challenges Of Philemon

Something about a challenge stirs fervor and action within our hearts. Do you remember the “double-dog-dare-you” challenges of childhood? Trees were climbed, rocks were thrown far distances, and feats of apparent impossibilities were performed in response to challenges. Challenges are not left behind with the innocence of youth. The challenge to know the unknown, to scale the highest heights or descend to the deepest canyons of the sea has spurred adult explorers to marvels of wonder. In 1987 two aviators seized the attention of the world as they circled the globe non-stop. It was a feat never before performed. The challenge was too great to resist.

Without challenges, life would become mundane. Many are bored with life because they have become callous to daily challenges. Those who remain unchallenged are isolated in a “ho-hum, hum-drum” existence that is terribly sad.

It is interesting to note that the principle of challenges exists also in the spiritual realm. Those who look at the clear challenges of living for Christ in the midst of a godless society are motivated and zealous (cf. Titus 2:11-14). But not all Christians are like this. Quite a number are indifferent, bored, and inactive because they have lost focus on biblical challenges. Believers who have become mechanical in devotion and ritualistic in practice are those who have turned their eyes away from the challenges of practical Christianity.

The short letter to Philemon brings our attention to focus upon three challenges of practical Christianity. If all would accept these challenges,

their Christian lives would become real, rewarding, and exciting!

If your Christianity has settled into a “ho-hum” rut and if you seem to lack satisfaction in living by faith’s direction, accept these three challenges of Philemon. Examine each, and observe how important they are for vitality in the believer’s life.

THE CHALLENGES PERSONALIZED

From the book of Philemon we discover three people who sharpen the focus of these challenges and help us see how to respond so that we will be profited by them.

We are to become as Paul. As you study the book of Philemon, there is One overpowering picture of Paul—he is a peacemaker! (vv. 8-11). This lovely attribute is a trait expected in all of God’s children (Hebrews 12:14, 15; James 3:17; Matthew 5:9). Unfortunately, this trait is often ignored—it is spurned in favor of the attitude of retaliation. Instead of bringing two opposing sides together and establishing harmony, many take sides and further the division. Too often the Lord’s church lacks peacemakers and finds the sad disruption of unity that is described in Philippians 4:2 or 1 Corinthians 3:3. May we all be challenged with Paul’s example as described in the book of Philemon. Become active in helping differences between brethren be resolved. If you are aware of those who are at odds with one another, do whatever you can to help them be reconciled in utility to Christ again (cf. Romans 14:19).

We are to become as Onesimus. In studying the book of Philemon we observe that this man was truly penitent, sensitive to sin in his life, anxious to make restitution, and eager to serve his brethren. These attitudes endeared him to the apostle (v. 16). Onesimus wanted to do God's will regardless of personal cost. He knew what was right, and he refused to do otherwise! What a tremendous challenge his example presents to us! It is so easy to excuse wrongdoing in our lives. But we must remember that sensitivity to God's will is mandatory for all who want to be acceptable to God (cf. Matthew 5:4; Acts 19:18-20; 1 Thessalonians 1:7-10; 2:13; Psalms 24:3-6). Accept this challenge that Onesimus presents! Become sensitive to God's rule in your life, be anxious to set all wrongs right, and be eager to serve your brethren.

*Sensitivity to
God's will is mandatory for all
who want to be acceptable
to God.*

We are to become as Philemon. Here was the object of this short letter. He was a wealthy citizen and conducted himself in such a way that he provided a great example of practical Christianity to others. In at least three ways, Philemon's faith was practical. First, it controlled his house (v. 2). Second, it dictated his friends (vv. 2, 5). Third, it directed his energies (v. 1). Anyone who knew Philemon would testify to his practical faith, hospitality, and brotherly love. Thus, we find in Philemon a man whose life challenges us to imitate him in every respect. We are called to possess the elements of Christianity exactly as Philemon did. How are you accepting this challenge? How practical is your Christianity in daily life? (Cf. Galatians 6:14; Matthew 5:13-16; 1 Peter 4:15.)

THE CHALLENGES SUMMARIZED

Each of these challenges calls for the believer to develop and maintain a specific quality of "love." It is a love for God and His gospel that prompts us to offer dedicated service as portrayed by the lives of Paul, Philemon, and Onesimus.

This kind of love sums up man's response to all the requirements of God (John 14:15; 1 Corinthians 13:13; 1 Timothy 1:5). The first and greatest command focused upon this love as described in Philemon (Matthew 22:37, 38). It was this love challenge which faced Peter (John 21:15ff.) and which all believers must answer today.

Stated in simple terms, the three challenges of the book of Philemon unite to ask, "Do you love God?" If you truly love God, you will demonstrate that love just as Paul, Philemon, and Onesimus did!

THE CHALLENGES' BLESSINGS

Those who discipline themselves to accept this genuine "love" for God, will find four wonderful blessings. . . .

First, there will be discovered the great joy and comfort of Christian fellowship (v. 7).

Second, there will be a genuine and free acceptance of all others who have been accepted by God (v. 17).

Third, there will be an inner peace which results when you trust in the providential care of Almighty God (v. 15; Psalms 119:165).

Fourth, all who follow these challenges will become "beneficial" (v. 20).

CONCLUSION

Flying around the world nonstop in an airplane was a challenge that had to be accepted. It was an arduous task, and the temptation to give up was ever present during the final stages of the journey. The two pilots even thought at times they were not going to make it—but they did!

In a similar manner the challenges of living a dedicated Christian life often appear too great, the way seems too tough, and the prospects of crossing the finish line appear hopeless. But God is confident about our strength, and as long as our faith rests upon Him we will be strong enough to overcome. Strength will come as we are motivated by these three challenges.

Resolve that you will accept them as personal challenges. Do not settle into a "ho-hum" Christianity! The clear challenge is to *love God!*

Be as Paul—become a peacemaker!

Be as Onesimus—be sensitive to God's will!
Be as Philemon—be totally controlled by Christianity!

—John Kachelman