

Philemon: A Character Worthy of Prayer (v. 4)

John Dickinson, Esq., of Birmingham, England, was often called “the peacemaker.” The equity of his decisions was rarely impeached. If John Dickinson had anything to do with a matter, it had to be right! That kind of reputation is a commendable accomplishment.

The present lesson calls attention to a quality we label “character.” One’s character is an amazing thing—it is visible, yet invisible; it is made known by speech, yet remains silent; it yields respect, yet often ridicule comes from the same mouth which praises it. “A good character is a coat of triple strength, giving security to the wearer, protection to the oppressed, and inspiring the oppressor with awe.”

Let us bring one man into sharp focus whose character was marvelous—Philemon of Colossae. It appears that he was a prominent citizen of Colossae and was probably converted to Christ during Paul’s Ephesian ministry. It seems that he was well-to-do. He owned slaves, he had a house that was large enough to serve as an assembly meeting place, and he was in a position to extend hospitality to a wide circle of brethren (vv. 2, 5, 16, 22).

From examination of the short letter to Philemon, we are able to see that the friendship between Paul and Philemon was strong. The letter, a personal note from Paul to Philemon, reveals that Philemon was constantly mentioned in Paul’s prayers. Such constant reference was due to Philemon’s character. Look at his character, and notice why it was worthy of frequent prayers.

PHILEMON’S CHARACTER—FROM MICROSCOPE TO MEMO PAD

Just as the lab worker examines and notes the pertinent facts about the slide under the microscope, we are able to look and observe the following features of Philemon’s character.

First, *we note the foundation of his character*—“brother” (vv. 1, 3). Philemon’s character was founded upon spiritual relations. When he heard the gospel and obeyed its commands, he accepted the mandate to change (cf. Romans 12:1, 2). Becoming a Christian meant that Philemon’s outlook on others would change. This change meant he would see others as his “brethren.” Becoming a Christian meant that Philemon’s outlook on God would also change. This change would cause him to view God as “our Father.” The conversion of Philemon was so pervasive that his entire perspective would undergo a drastic change (Galatians 2:20; Ephesians 5:8). As his perspective changed, so did his character! As Paul wrote to Philemon’s home congregation, Colossae, about the change that transpires in conversion, he used an interesting word—“renewed” (Colossians 3:10). This word can be translated “renovated” and suggests a thorough refurbishing. It was this kind of renovation that took place in Philemon’s life. He was a Christian, and such provided him with the foundation to create a new character (Ephesians 3:10; 2 Corinthians 5:17; Colossians 3:5-10).

Second, *we note the motivation for his character*—“love” (vv. 5, 7, 9). What moved Philemon to develop such a godly character? There is a simple

answer—he possessed a wonderful “love” for God (John 4:15) and for his fellow saints (John 13:35). Philemon’s heart was sensitive; his kindness was evident as he looked for ways to fill needs in other’s lives. The motivation of love is the supreme reason why we should deny self and serve others, for such will emulate our blessed Lord (Galatians 2:20b). When one is motivated by love, he will develop a godly character like Philemon (1 Corinthians 13:4-7). Philemon had grasped the beauty of God’s love, and he was, therefore, motivated to serve. Realizing how great God’s love was caused Philemon to create a loving, godly character (1 John 3:16).

Third, *we note the practice of his character*. A general overview of the book of Philemon indicates that he was full of faith and godly practice. There are a few specifics where Philemon’s character stands out in an admirable way. . . .

Philemon’s presence gave a comforting “refreshing” to fellow believers (vv. 7, 20). Fellow brethren could find rest at Philemon’s house; there was sanctuary. Those who were torn with strife and wrestling with inner turmoil found a quiet comfort in Philemon’s presence. Rest and relief were in ample supply at his home. What a marvelous discovery this point is! Modern society is so restless, and its restlessness has infected many others. We need to become like Philemon and provide places of refuge where “refreshing” can occur. Is your home like Philemon’s in this respect?

Philemon’s behavior demonstrated obedience (v. 21). His reputation gave Paul’s plea a ready answer. Paul was certain that Philemon would quickly obey. Once again, such an example is in short supply. Christians need to have reputations of obedience so there will be no question about our response to obvious commands.

Philemon’s faith was practiced! (v. 5). He was generous in practicing love and benevolence. To Philemon the gospel lived only in the practice of its divine principles! (cf. 1 John 4:7, 20, 21). To Philemon “theology” was not cloistered in seminary classrooms but practiced in every place “toward all.” How beautiful this man’s faith was!

Philemon was evangelistic (vv. 1, 6). Paul’s passing remark, almost an incidental, was that he recognized Philemon as a “fellow worker.” This intimates the dedication of Philemon. The apostle’s desire was that Philemon “actively share” the gospel (v. 6). As you consider the

character of Philemon, this was more a statement of fact than a prayer-wish!

Philemon was devoted to hospitality (v. 22). A “lover of strangers” is always the cause for prayer. How many Christian souls have been nourished and refreshed by the warm hospitality afforded by a simple house filled with Christian love? This practice of hospitality reflects the benevolent concern and acceptance of the loving Father in heaven. The counsel of God is that all saints “pursue hospitality” (Romans 12:13) because of its rich rewards.

These five practices of Philemon are uncommon. They are uniquely distinctive as belonging to one who has created a character that resembles the Father in heaven!

Fourth, *we note the consequences of his character*. All seed sown will eventually reap its appropriate fruit. Such was true with Philemon (cf. Hosea 10:12). We would expect his character to bring forth fruits of a godly sort, and indeed it did. Notice two fruits evident in Philemon’s character. . . .

His character brought “joy” to brethren (v. 7). What else could result but an inspiring and uplifting affect upon others? Be sure to observe that his kind of character will bring forth “much joy” (cf. Philippians 1:7, 8).

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He also found blissful “grace” from God (v. 25). There was a personal blessing found. God will recompense all who nurture a character such as Philemon’s (Hebrews 6:10).

The consequences of a character created and governed by God’s Word will bring forth untold blessings (Psalms 15:1-5). Let us all be diligent to perfect their characters, so they will be able to enjoy the many blessings of God.

PHILEMON’S CHARACTER—FROM THE LABORATORY TO LIFE

Such a character, renovating by the gospel’s

influence, is a sparkling gem, an assured blessing. But we must take it out of the lab and put it into life if we are to profit.

Let us then use Philemon's character as a standard of honest evaluation for ourselves. Be honest with yourself as you consider Philemon. Having examined his attitudes, how do your attitudes compare?

Upon what is your character founded? Upon what value system are your decisions determined? Philemon determined all things in relation to God. Do you use God or self to determine decisions in life? (vv. 1, 3).

What motivates your service? What motivates your obedience? Philemon was motivated by an unselfish love (v. 5). How about you?

What "consequences" are you expecting from the seeds of your life's work? We are all sowing now what we will reap later. Can we be assured that our harvest will be as blessed as Philemon's? (Hosea 10:12).

How practical is your faith? Is it restricted to the church building? Is it confined to Sunday mornings from 9:00 to 11:00 a.m.? Does your faith permeate every aspect of your life?

These questions are important and can only be correctly answered by one who is striving to develop a character like Philemon—a character renovated by the gospel's power!

Let us remember that Philemon's character is a mandate for practical Christianity in all believers! We must live faith-in-action! How practical is your faith? Do others see you as "practicing" Christianity?

"I know nothing about that man's creed," said a person about a religious tradesman with whom he dealt, "because I never asked him what he believed; but a more honorable, punctual, generous tradesman I have never met in my life. I would just as soon take his word for a \$1,000.00 debt as another man's for a \$1.00 debt. Whatever he promises he performs, and to the time also." Such could have been spoken about Philemon. Can it be spoken about you?

CONCLUSION

From the Asia Minor province comes a man of powerful character—Philemon. He created a character that magnified God and comforted brethren. Philemon shows us that our influence should be dramatic. Philemon's life demon-

strated a loving and cheerful servitude to his heavenly Father. His character was superb and furnished a haven for tired, distraught brethren. No better words could describe Philemon than those found in Philippians 2:2-5.

"Philemon" is a name that literally means "friendly" or "affectionate." All saints have the privilege, no, rather the duty, to become a modern "Philemon." It is a challenging thought and all should be motivated to change by considering it!

"Character" is not a massive unit that is constructed all at once. It is more like fabric. It is made up of the interplay of thousands upon thousands of acts, words, and thoughts. Every day its threads are spun to weave the whole. Innumerable threads of the days of our earthly existence unite to form our "character." We must weave our characters slowly and carefully. The acts we do, the thoughts we think, and the resolutions we make all affect our character. At death the character is to be woven no more, and as Isaiah suggests it is taken off the loom of life and held up for all to see (Isaiah 38:12). Look at the fabric of your character—what flaws need to be corrected so your character will be as Philemon's, perfectly renovated by the gospel's power?

—John Kachelman

How Is Your Love Appeal? (Philemon 9)

One of the strongest appeals ever made is from genuine affection for another. Paul held a genuine affection for Philemon and his appeal came from that love. We note that true love appeal must come from these sources:

1. Genuine love focuses not on self but on others (v. 10).
2. Genuine love focuses upon our connection to and union with God—"begotten."
3. Genuine love is able to see the value and worth of anyone (v. 11).
4. Genuine love is confident and trusting in other brethren to do right (v. 21).

The way of the New Testament Christianity is love, not compulsion.