

## **LETTER TO PHILEMON.**

This letter of Paul's differs from the rest of the epistles in being a private communication on a private matter, affecting only the brother to whom principally it was sent. It is none the less, however, instructive to those who seek to be "followers of Paul as he was of Christ." It is a model of letter-writing, as it ought to be among brethren. A right mode of intercourse is one of the many things we have to learn on being called "out of darkness to the marvellous light of God." We are too apt to rest content, with a change of view; we are too apt to stop short in the process which, rightly worked out, ends in a "new creature." It is a time before we take on the new man in his entirety. The ways of the old man linger with us in thought, speech, and (too often) in action. The heartless (and even slang) talk of a world living in wickedness; or the chilling propriety of polite letter writing, which deals, like "science," with external things only, and knows nothing of the noble warmth that comes from the First Cause, who is love, and whose family is in training for His likeness—sometimes remain like scarcely-thawed ice under a winter sun, disfiguring and obstructing the development of the life which the truth is designed to create in the poor shivering servants of sin.

Now we must take our cue in this, as in all other matters, from apostolic example. We must not be led away with the idea that the apostles occupied a sphere too high for us to attain. If we hope to be with them in the day of the manifestation of the sons of God, we must strive to conform to their thoughts and ways, in these, our days of the prophecy and the tribulation. They have commanded us to imitate them even as ye have us (the apostles) for an example (Philippians 3: 17); and this command we must obey, if we desire to stand right in the day when popular sentiment and popular usage in such things will disappear as completely as mist before the rising of the sun. The apostles are our brethren. Their being called "apostles" simply signifies that they were specially sent (from *apostolos*, one sent). Their speciality lay in the message they had to deliver; it did not lie in the principles or practices required of them. These principles and practices (commanded by Christ) are of common obligation among all their fellow-heirs unto eternal life. They are exhibited in the apostles as patterns for our imitation.

Now in the case in question, we find Paul, in the capacity of a private letter-writer, describing Philemon as his "*dearly beloved and fellow-labourer*"; Apphia as his "*beloved*"; and Archippus as his "*fellow-soldier*." Doubtless, there is in our day a great deal of hypocritical cant in the use of friendly phrases; this may have had the effect of toning down the cordiality of true men, who abhor effeminate sanctimony, but it is no reason why they should discard the genuine article. There is a great and always perceptible difference between the parroting of friendly forms of speech and the genuine use of these as the channels of a real friendship in Christ. Therefore, the existence of the one need not exclude the other. Nay, we may go further, and say that the genuine cannot be excluded. Where a friendship of the apostolic type, having its foundation in God, truly exists, it will show itself in its own way as inevitably as the love of the sexes. Let the love of the brethren have its free course. Let us not be afraid to call them "beloved," and "dearly beloved," and "fellow-labourers," if they be so. By all means let us eschew a hackneyed or stereotyped phraseology, which is as lifeless as the rattle of a Papist's beads; but let us not on principle steer clear of endearments. They belong to the truth, and the truth has scarcely got hold of us if we feel them not. Let us not say "dearly beloved" if we feel not so; let us not salute another as a "fellow-labourer" if he be

not so. Let all our words be built in truth; but let us not rob ourselves or our brethren of the sweetness and the edification that come from a frank and childlike declaration of the glorious love that grows from the truth.

*"Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ."* This is Paul's opening salutation in his letter. Should such a salutation always be absent from the letters of his nineteenth century brethren? Thank God, these words of purest blessings are not unknown among the brethren; but they are not yet so common as—in the will of God—the truth may make them. Do we advocate a stereotyped form? By no means. They are not stereotyped in Paul's letters, though very nearly so. We advocate conformity to the Spirit of the thing. In some form or other, Paul always invokes the blessing of the Father and of the Lord on those to whom he writes in love. It is not difficult to see that this is a good thing. It is an exercise in true godliness every time it is done. It unbends the mind to the attitude of suppliancy and benevolence, which we always ought to occupy. It brings with it to our own mind a recognition of God's relation to all our matters, in whose hand our breath is, and whose are all our ways. It sheds the right influence on those to whom we may address ourselves. It brings before them great facts to which a mere attention to business is apt to make us oblivious. Finally, and most consequently, does it not command the Divine approbation and blessing? Is there no such thing as *"Grace, mercy and peace from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ?"* Are these empty words? If they are, let us not use them. But if they are not—if God does extend favour, and shed mercy and give peace to His children even now—comforting them in all the tribulations that they may endure; and if Christ as the mediator does take part in this actual, invisible, and gracious work—are we not robbing ourselves, and our brethren, and our Master, and our God, in missing our many opportunities of invocation?

Paul says he *"thanked God, making mention of Philemon always in his prayers."* In this frank allusion to the subject-matter of his private petitions, we have insight into another feature, which deserves our notice and imitation. Paul was not above thanking God for a worthy fellow-labourer, and letting him know it. In our dry, democratic days, this fruit of the Spirit is nearly extinct. A universal self esteem kills generous gratitude in the birth, and fears to lose its own exaltation by even implied appreciation of another's worth. This is an obstinate shrub of the desert, which must be cut down to make way for the lovely flowers of Eden, which delight the eye and regale the senses with their fragrance. But when will the cutting-down be? Well, in some cases it will take place now, under the exhortation to "mortify" and "crucify" all the characteristics of the old man of the flesh. It is better to apply the knife ourselves. If we would judge ourselves, we should not be judged.

Paul, however, did not thank God for Philemon merely because he was a brother. This is sometimes not a cause for thanksgiving: for there are many whom we may thank God are not brethren, because of the disgrace and hindrance that would come from their being so: and there are some concerning whose brotherhood we cannot be thankful, because, like those of whom Paul speaks in another place, though professing godliness, they are destitute of the power thereof, and are enemies of the cross of Christ, though bearing the name of friends. What made Paul thankful was this: *"Hearing of thy love and faith which thou hast TOWARD THE LORD JESUS and toward all saints."* Such a condition in any professor will certainly inspire thanksgiving in any brother to whom, like Paul, *"to live is Christ."* It is an unerring law that *"he that loveth him that begat, loveth him also that is begotten"* (1 John 5: 1). A man whose sympathies are toward God and the Lord Jesus will, without fail, have his love drawn out by those symptoms in another, which show he has been begotten by the word of truth

(James 1: 18). So decided and unmistakable is the operation of this law that John says *"By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and keep His commandments"* (1 John 5: 2). A brother among the children of Sodom, whether these bear the name or not, might have the experience of Lot *"whose righteous soul was vexed from day to day."* His love would not be drawn out. His soul would be stirred within him disagreeably, in accordance with the characteristic of divinely approved men who cannot bear them that are evil" (Revelation 2: 2), and despise vile men, honouring them that fear the Lord (Psalm 15: 4); but, by John's rule, he would be able to comfort himself in the drought and in bitterness. He knows within himself that God is his chief delight, and the commandments of God the subject of his supreme regard. He can therefore say to himself, "though my antipathies are stirred; though my soul eats in bitterness: though my love is rarely called out, I know that I love the children of God, because I love God and keep His commandments. I have only to meet them to have my soul awakened to the fulness of love, and borne aloft with exceeding joy."

*"We have great joy and consolation in thy love,"* says Paul to Philemon, *"because the bowels of the saints are refreshed by thee, brother."* Paul's satisfaction on Philemon's account arose from Philemon's spontaneous well-doing—not well-doing in the limited sense of correctness of conduct, which in many cases is but a refined kind of selfishness; but well-doing in the sense of doing good to others. There is no more consoling manifestation than this—to see a brother refreshing the saints, comforting, sustaining, helping, gladdening them in the things of the Lord. There are who discourage, pull down, hinder and distress by their hypercriticism and unwise pugnacity, and others by their evil deeds.

Others there are whose influence is simply neutral, which is better than mischievous, and some who are neutral think they are of Philemon's stamp refreshing to the saints: but the latter are the judges. No man can testify of himself. The fruit is known by its taste; and the fruit depends upon the seed and the soil it is grown in. Let every man enrich his ground with self-crucifixion, and plant carefully the seed of the Word, and water well with prayer and daily reading, watching, and plucking the weeds; the fruit will then be pleasant to the taste of all who eat. Without this training, nature's rank growth will come up in its wild profusion; and for a paradise of God, there will be a garden of weeds.

The way Paul introduces and disposes of the private business that required him to write this letter to Philemon, is eloquent in lessons of courtesy and kindness. While he was a prisoner at Rome, a certain runaway slave named Onesimus came into contact with Paul, probably through being detained as a suspected runaway in the same prison. At all events, the result of the contact was that Onesimus received the truth; and the question may be understood to have come up between them, "What, in the altered circumstances, was the duty of Onesimus towards Philemon, his master, from whom he had fled?" We can easily imagine Paul advising him to return, and offering to give him a letter of introduction that would protect him from the consequences. The letter before us is the result. *"I might be much bold,"* says Paul, *"to enjoin thee that which is convenient, yet for love's sake, I rather beseech thee."* Why might Paul have assumed the attitude of command? Because he was an apostle, and because Philemon, equally with Onesimus, was his son in the Gospel. But Paul does not take the attitude he might have taken. Why? For love's sake. Very well, if Paul abstained from the dictatorial and resorted to the persuasive—the supplicatory—the courteous—the respectful, which of his poor copyists in this late century will justify the adoption of a different style? Few would care to justify such a thing theoretically, and yet many practise what they would be ashamed to preach. In their dealings with men and brethren they are not gentle and

courteous, but imperious, abrupt, dogmatic, and disrespectful. This ought not to be so. Followers of Paul must be what Paul was if they are to follow him into the kingdom; they must be kind, gentle, courteous, easy to be entreated; and not austere, haughty, unfeeling, harsh, implacable, selfish, overbearing, and unkind. These are the features of the old man, whose children "shall not inherit the kingdom of Christ and of God."

Paul beseeches Philemon to receive Onesimus, *"not now as a slave, but above a slave—as a brother beloved."* "Receive him," says Paul, *"as myself: that is 'if thou count me a partner.'"* Paul does not even presume upon Philemon's recognition of his position. An egotist would have taken this for granted without qualification, and even paraded his presumption; but Paul had modesty enough to allow the possibility of Philemon thinking as little of him as he did of himself, *"leaving us an example."* *"If he (Onesimus) hath wronged thee, or oweth thee ought, put that on mine account. I, Paul, have written it with mine own hand. I will repay it."* This is a very practical illustration of what Paul means when he exhorts believers to *"bear one another's burdens."* It is a distinct taking by Paul on his own shoulders of the obligations which were burdensome to another. In this, some in our day might consider Paul a foolish enthusiast, that is, if their estimate of his case is to be argued from their view of such conduct in our day. Well, we must be on our guard against the influence of such. It is very common to praise virtue in the abstract, and admire it in remote times, but to pooh pooh it when the occasion for it comes to our own door; and on the other hand, men unite with refreshing unanimity in the condemnation of selfishness and rapacity that have become historic, but at the same time practise every day the same thing without compunction. In the name of our eternal well-being, let us, be on our guard. There were men in the days of Christ who made a great show of religion, but of whom he said they bound heavy burdens on other men's shoulders, but would not so much as lift a little finger to ease them. And there are the same sort now. We must not take our morality from them. Only the well-doing prescribed by the King will pass the King's muster in the day of account; and prominent as a feature thereof is this virtue illustrated in the words of Paul: *"I, Paul, have written it with mine own hand—I will repay it."*

Let us be with Paul in the great day approaching. But if we stand with him then, it will be because we stand with him now in his rules of business, taking not our cue from the world in such matters; but in all things acting on the principles on which we hope to govern and see the world governed in that glorious day when the haughtiness of men shall be brought down, and the Lord alone shall be exalted.

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