

COMMENTARY ON THE EPISTLE OF PAUL TO PHILEMON

by
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Text

Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and our brother Timothy, to Philemon, our beloved and fellow worker, and to Appia, the sister, and to Archippus, our fellow soldier, and to the church that is in your house: grace be to you and peace from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ.

I give thanks to my God, always making remembrance of you in my prayers, as I hear of your charity and of the faith that you have in our Lord Jesus and towards all the saints. May the sharing of your faith be made evident in full knowledge of all the good that is in you, in Christ Jesus. For I had great joy and consolation in your charity, because through you, brother, the hearts of the saints have found rest.

For this reason, though I am very confident that I might charge you in Christ Jesus to do, what is fitting, yet for the sake of charity I prefer to plead, since you are such as you are; as Paul, an old man — and now also a prisoner of Jesus Christ — I plead with you for my own son, whom I have begotten in prison, for Onesimus. He once was useless to you, but now is useful both to me and to you. I am sending him back to you, and do you welcome him as though he were my very heart. I had wanted to keep him here with me that in your stead he might wait on me in my imprisonment for the Gospel; but I did not want to do anything without your counsel, in order that your kindness might not be as it were of necessity, but voluntary.

Perhaps, indeed, he departed from you for a short while so that you might receive him for ever, no longer as a slave, but instead of a slave as a brother

most dear, especially to me, and how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord! If therefore you does count me as a partner, welcome him as you would me. And if he did you any injury or owes anything, charge it to me. I, Paul, write it with my own hand: I will repay it — not to say to you that you owe me your very self. Yes, indeed, brother! May I too make use of you in the Lord! Console my heart in the Lord!

Trusting in your compliance, I am writing to you, knowing that you wilt do even beyond what I say. At the same time make ready a lodging for me too, for I hope that through your prayers I shall be restored to you. Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, Mark, Aristarchus, Demas and Luke, my fellow workers send you greetings. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Amen.

Preface

'If you have a faithful servant, let him be to you as your own soul' (Sirach 33:31). The wise man shows three things concerning master and slave, namely, what is required on the side of the servant; what ought to be the feeling of the master towards the servant; and what is the use of the servant. From the servant fidelity is asked, for in this he is a good servant, because what he is and all that he has he ought to give to the master. Matthew 24-45: 'Who, do you think, is the faithful and prudent servant...' And he says, 'if he is faithful', because fidelity is found in few. Proverbs 20:6: 'But who shall find a faithful man?' The master ought to feel towards his servant as a friend, hence it is said, 'as his own soul'. For this is proper to friends, that they are of one mind in what they will and what they do not will. Acts 4.32: 'Now the multitude of the believers were of one heart and one soul.' By which we are given to understand that there is a consensus of master and servant, when the faithful servant becomes a friend. As for his use, he should be treated like a brother, for he is a brother, both with respect to generation of nature, because they have the same author — Job 31.13: 'If I have despised to abide judgement with my man-servant'; Malachi 2:10: 'Have we not all one father? Did not one God created us?' —and with respect to the generation of grace, which is the same for both. Galatians 3:27: 'For all you who have been baptized into Christ, have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek; there is neither slave nor freeman; there is neither male nor female. For you are all one in Christ Jesus.' Matthew 23:8: 'And all you are brothers.' These words are relevant to the matter of this epistle. For as it was shown above how spiritual prelates should relate to their subjects, so here he shows how temporal masters should relate to their temporal servants, and how the faithful servant to his master.

The occasion of the epistle is this. At Colossae an important Christian had a servant who secretly fled to Rome where he was baptized by the Apostle who

now writes on his behalf. First he gives a greeting, followed by the narrative of the epistle. In the greeting he mentions persons who send their greeting and then the recipients and finally the good hoped for.

On the text

Therefore he says *Paul*, — a name to be revered by all the faithful who have been taught by him — *a prisoner*. 2 Timothy 2:9: 'in which I suffer even to bonds, as a criminal'. For now he is a prisoner in Rome, but of Christ Jesus, to give the reason for his chains. For it is highly praiseworthy to be imprisoned for the sake of Christ; for in this he is blessed. Matthew 5:10: 'Blessed are they who suffer persecution for justice' sake...' 2 Peter 4:15: 'Let none of you suffer as a murderer, or a thief, or a slanderer, or as one coveting what belongs to others. But if he suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God under this name.' Acts 5:41: 'So they departed from the Sanhedrin, rejoicing that they had been counted worthy to suffer disgrace for the name of Jesus.'

And our brother Timothy... They are brothers with regard to perfect faith. Philippians 2:20: 'For I have no one so like-minded who is so genuinely solicitous for you.' He joins Timothy to himself, that he might more easily succeed, because it is impossible that the prayers of many will not be heard.

Then he mentions the persons greeted. And first the principal person greeted, then others, particularly the husband and wife whose house it is, to whom the servant is obliged. *To Philemon, our beloved and fellow worker, and to Appia, beloved sister...* Beloved, he says on account of her good works. John 13:34: 'This is my command, that you love one another.' Fellow worker, because he ministers to the saints. Proverbs 18:19: 'A brother that is helped by his brother is like a strong city.' Then he mentions *Archippus our fellow soldier*, who was so powerful at Colossae that all Christians were under his protection.

That is why he brings in the whole Church there, of which he was the bishop, writing in Colossians 4:17, 'And say to Archippus: "Look to the ministry which you have received in the Lord, that you fulfil it."' And he calls Archippus 'fellow soldier' because all prelates are, as it were, spiritual soldiers of the Church. 2 Corinthians 10:4: 'For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal...' *And to the church...* He adds this in order to move him to hear plainly the expected good that is set forth, as was customary. Then when he says, *I give thanks to my God*, the burden of the letter begins. First, he gives thanks; then he makes his plea, *For this reason...* ; finally, he concludes, *For I had great joy...*

Again, first he expresses thanks; second he gives the reason for his gratitude: *as*

I hear of your charity... ; third, the reason why he thanks God: *For I had great joy and consolation... I give thanks to my God.* Colossians 3:15: 'Show yourself thankful.' Philippians 4:6: 'With thanksgiving let your petitions be made to God.' As if he said: I give thanks for past things in order that I might pray for future things. Therefore he says: *always making remembrance of you in my prayers...* Philippians 11:7: 'Because I have you in my heart, all of you, alike in my chains.' Isaiah 49-15: 'Can a woman forget her infant, so as not to have pity on the son of her womb? And if she should forget, yet will not I forget you.'

Stating the matter of his giving thanks and of his prayer, he shows what he asks when he prays for them. The matter of this was the needs and goods of Philemon, namely, both charity and faith. For without charity nothing avails and through it all things are had. 1 Corinthians 13:1: 'If I should speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but do not have charity, I have become as sounding brass or a tinkling cymbal.' Again, without faith no one can love God, because he does not truly know God. He makes no mention of hope, because it is midway between and is understood in the others. But in whom should they have faith and charity? *in our Lord Jesus.* 1 Corinthians 16:22: 'If any man does not love the Lord Jesus Christ, let him be anathema.' This is necessary, because from Christ more sweetly comes love for the members; because he who does not love the members, does not love the head. 1 John 4:20: 'For how can he who does not love his brother, whom he sees, love God, whom he does not see?'

And towards all the saints... Faith is based on doctrine insofar as it is manifested through Christ, 'because no one has seen God', John 31.18; and, 'You believe in God, believe also in me,' John 14.1. We have Christ, therefore, through faith. *Towards all the saints* can be understood in two ways. In one way, because from the faith they have in Christ proceed the prayers made for the saints. Or, faith consists principally in the divinity as it is announced by Christ, and not only by Christ, but also by the saints. Matthew 28:19: 'Go therefore and make disciples of all nations...' Therefore we ought to believe not only what was said by Christ but also what was said by the saints. Hebrews 2:3: 'For it was first announced by the Lord and was confirmed unto us by those who heard him.'

May the sharing of your faith... This is shared in two ways. In one way, that it might be a sign. *Be made evident in full knowledge...* That is, so great is your charity, that the sharing of your faith... *I give thanks... always making remembrance...* That he might show what he seeks for him in praying. And the sharing of the faith can be understood in two ways. Either because in faith they share with all the saints, not having any new faith, like heretics. 1 Corinthians 1:10: 'That you all say the same thing.' Or, sharing, whereby you share good things with the saints, proceeding from faith. 1 Timothy 6:17: 'Charge the rich of this world not to be proud, or to trust in the uncertainty of riches, but in God,

who provides all things in abundance for our enjoyment.'

Made evident in full knowledge... That is, that the good hidden in the heart become evident in good works. *In full knowledge of all the good that is in you...* And this in Christ Jesus. James 2.18: 'Show me your faith without works, and I from my works will show you my faith.' Or, there are in the world many works which are good for men, and yet are not good for God, because they do not come about rightly. Proverbs 14:12: 'There is a way which seems just to a man: but in the end it leads to death.' Ecclesiastes 8:10: 'I saw the wicked buried: who also when they were yet living were in the holy place, and were praised in the city as men of just works.' But this is manifested through correct faith, when reward comes from God, who only rewards the righteous. Therefore he says *made evident in full knowledge*, that is, that this might be made evident, that you might know every good. Or that *all the good that is in you* might become known, which is the fruit of divinity. Exodus 33.19: 'I will show you all good.' Wisdom 7:11: 'Now all good things come to me together with her.'

The reason he gives thanks is joy. And he says, *For I had great joy and consolation...* 3 John 4: 'I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth.' For this joy alleviates anxiety. That is why he adds consolation. Psalm 93:119: 'When anxieties are increased in my heart, your comfortings delight my soul.' He explains why, saying *because through you, brother, the hearts of the saints have found rest*. Colossians 3:12... 'Put on, therefore, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, a heart of mercy, kindness, humility, meekness, patience.' 3 John 2: 'Beloved I pray that in all things you may prosper and be in health...'

Then when he says *For this reason*, he makes his plea. And first he states the confidence with which he asks; second, the petition itself, *I plead with you...*; third, his reason, *Perhaps, indeed...* He says, For this reason, that is, because you so abound in charity, I have great trust in Christ Jesus, as if to say, not from me, but from the authority of Jesus Christ, in which faith I gave birth to you. Therefore, I could command you as a father both concerning your own and common matters. Otherwise a prelate would not have had the power to command what was for his usefulness, or the Church's, or of the good morals of the Christian religion. *Yet for the sake of charity I prefer to plead...* Proverbs 18.23: 'The poor will speak with supplications...' And why? *Since you are such as you are*.

There are two things on account of which one ought to plead. Because of old age. 1 Timothy 1: 'Do not reproach an old man, but ask him as a father.' Again, because of the honourableness of virtue, for where we are not deficient, we are equals. Sirach 32:1, 'Have they made you ruler? Be not lifted up: be among them

as one of them.' Therefore he says, *since you are such as you are*, as Paul, *an old man*, as if to say, if you were a boy, I would demand this of you, but you too are old. You are of the same stage of life as I. Not that they are such and so much simply speaking, but in a way similar, which he says out of his humility. Romans 12:10: 'anticipating one another with honour'. Origen said that it is rare to find a useful teacher in the Church who is not old, thinking of Peter and Paul.

Having expressed his confidence in Philemon's goodness, here he states his request. And first he indicates the person on whose behalf he pleads; second, he concludes the request. The first is subdivided into two, because first by describing the person he shows that he has received him in spiritual birth; second, by a change of status. Therefore he says, *I plead with you for my own son, whom I have begotten in prison, for Onesimus*, who is his present concern. And acquiring a son in default of time, he loves him more, as an old man loves sons born to him in his old age. Genesis 37:3: 'Now Israel loved Joseph above all his sons, because he had him in his old age.' This one [Onesimus] was given birth in chains. Second, there is the change in status. For if he had persevered in sin, he would not be worthy of leniency. Note that Paul says little and means much. For as Cicero taught, one ought to make little of one's own deed as much as possible. Thus the Apostle speaks lightly of his offence, saying, *He once was useless to you*, that is, harmful in taking away your possession, but now, converted from evil to the state of virtue, he is useful for the service of God and man. 2 Timothy 2:21: 'If anyone, therefore, has cleansed himself from these, he will be a vessel for honourable use...' Proverbs 25:4: 'Take away the rust from silver, and there shall come forth a most pure vessel.'

Then when he says, *I am sending him back to you*, he makes his request. First, he makes it, then he answers a question: *I had wanted to keep him here*. And so he says, *and do you welcome him as though he were my very heart*. And this because I have seen him changed, the sign of which is, I send him back to you. On the contrary, Deuteronomy 23:15: 'Thou shalt not deliver to his master the servant that is fled to you.' I reply that is true when the master seeks him in order to put him to death. Therefore, he says, I did not want to do anything...' Philippians 1-7: 'I have the right to feel so about you, because I have you in my heart, all of you, alike in my chains.'

And he responds to a question, because it might be said if he is useful to you, why do you not keep him unto death? And he gives the reason for sending him back. First, he considers why he might keep him; second, why he rejects that idea: *but I did not want to do anything without your counsel*. Therefore, he says to Philemon who, although he is a great man, is accustomed to minister to the Apostle. Matthew 10:26: 'On the contrary, whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant.' Out of this confidence he proposed to keep

him, so that in place of Philemon he might minister to him. *I had wanted to keep him here with me that in your stead he might wait on me in my imprisonment for the Gospel.* This was something especially needed since he was in chains for the sake of Christ, for one is provided for when he suffers for his master. The reason he rejected the idea was that he did not want to use another's property without the owner's knowledge. Hence, *but I did not want to do anything...* As if he said: if I should keep him, it would please you who do not wish to resist but it would be a kind of force. But I did not want that, indeed I wanted it to come about voluntarily. Exodus 25:2: 'Of every man who offers of his own accord, you shall take them,' that is, the first fruits. 2 Corinthians 9:7: 'Let each one give according as he has determined in his heart, not grudgingly or from compulsion, for "God loves a cheerful giver."' "

Then when he says, *Perhaps, indeed...*, he gives the reason why he ought to receive him kindly, first, on the side of God, second, on the side of the Apostle: *If therefore you count me as a partner...* ; third, on the part of Philemon himself: *Trusting in your compliance...* On the side of God, because the providence of God often permits what is evil to come about, in order that good might follow from it, as is clear from the sale of Joseph, that he might free Egypt and the family of his father. Genesis 45:5: 'For God sent me before you into Egypt for your preservation.' He says Perhaps because the judgements of God are incomprehensible, Romans 11:33. And he says *instead of a slave*, that is, in place of a slave. Matthew 23:8: 'For one is your master and all are your brothers.' And not only yours, but mine in comparison to God, though he is a son to the ministry.

How much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord. This can be expounded in two ways. First, as referring to the first origin of the divine creation, and thus he is a brother. Deuteronomy 32:6: 'Is not he your father, that hath possessed you, and made you, and created you?' Malachi 2:10: 'Have we not all one father? Did not one God created us?' Again, by trust in God. Or it might rather be for the good of Philemon, because he is close to him in the flesh, since that is how he is his slave, because whatever he is bodily belongs to Philemon. Hence one is moved by charity for two reasons, by love which has its origin in the flesh, or by spiritual love. On the part of the Apostle, he first declares his friendship, under which aegis he wants Philemon to take Onesimus back; second, he offers to pay any damages; third he shows the function of receiving. Second, *If, therefore, you...* Third, *Yes, indeed, brother!*

Therefore, he says, *If, therefore, you dost count me as a partner, welcome him.* 1 John 1:7: 'But if we walk in the light as he also is in the light, we have fellowship with one another.' And he says *as you would me* because he is linked with me. Matthew 10:40: 'Who receives you, receives me.'

Second, he offers to make good any injury to Philemon, saying, *And if he did you any injury or owes you anything*, namely by leaving his service, *charge it to me*. As if to say, I will make satisfaction. Galatians 6.2.: 'Bear one another's burdens.' And more, because he first offers to make it good; second, he shows that Philemon is in his debt, not of necessity but of will.

Therefore he says, *I, Paul*, as if to say, that you might be certain of restitution. *I write it with my own hand*. And this not out of necessity, *because you owe me your very self*, because I snatched you from eternal death, and thus he should do this for his liberator. Tobias 9:2: 'If I should give myself to be your servant, I should not make a worthy return for your care.' And he adds, *Yes, indeed, brother, may I too make use of you*, as if to say, if you want me for a partner, take him back, and I will so use you, brother, that is, if you do it, you will fill my wishes with joy. For to make use is to use the fruit and thus it is to use for the useful, as I enjoy fruit. It implies the sweetness of the fruit; Song of Songs 2:3: 'And his fruit was sweet to my palate.' And the end, because the ultimate produce of the tree is its fruit. Therefore, to enjoy is properly to have something which is pleasant and final. Hence Augustine says that we enjoy thinking of things in which the will delights because of their sweetness. Again, to enjoy is to adhere to something for its own sake. Sometimes 'enjoy' and 'use' are taken commonly as implying enjoyment without the contrary. Sirach 8:10: 'and to serve great men without blame'. Therefore he says, *May I too make use of you*, because you are against me in nothing. And if in this you please me, there will be nothing in my heart concerning you that saddens me, and thus you will delight me. But if we take enjoyment as something final, then one does not enjoy man, but God alone. Contrary to this seems to be Wisdom 2:6: 'Come therefore, and let us enjoy the good things that are present: and let us speedily use the creatures as in youth.' Hence he adds *in the Lord*, that is, May I, too, make use of you in the delight of God, rejoicing in the divine good that is in you, because his action is love, and the enjoyment of its effect, namely, charity. That is why he adds *console my heart*. A man is consoled spiritually when the desires of his heart are fulfilled. As if he said: fulfil the deepest desires of my heart. And not with respect to evil, but in the Lord, and thus the fulfilment of desire is good.

Then when he says *Trusting in your compliance*, he provides a reason on the side of Philemon, and a commendation of his obedience. First he shows how he is confident in his obeying; second he adds to it something similar. Therefore he says, *Trusting in your compliance*. 2 Corinthians 7:16: 'I rejoice that in all things I can have confidence in you.' 1 Sam 15:22: 'For obedience is better than sacrifices.' But he writes more cautiously because a man listens more closely to one he expects to see again than if he despairs. Therefore he says, *At the same time make ready a lodging for me too*. For it was his custom when he was in Colossae to stay in his home. Chrysostom asks what we are to make of this

remark in which a poor man commands a rich man by letter from across the expanse of the earth to prepare a lodging for him. What would have to be prepared for one content with bread and cheap victuals? It should be said that it was not for the sake of the preparation of lodging that he says this, but to insinuate familiarity and love; in this way he will be prompt to obey. The Apostle therefore does not say this on account of external trappings but out of his devotion. *For I hope that through your prayers I shall be restored to you.*

Against this is the fact that he never returned to them but died in Rome, therefore his hope was dashed. I reply that the hope of the just is of two kinds, the chief of which is for his own good, and this is never dashed; another secondary hope is the proof of others, and this is sometimes dashed, because their merits are contrary, as the just man is sometimes not heeded by others. But was he deceived in his trust? It should be said that God alone knows the future; that is not for human knowledge, except the prophetic. And no prophet knows all the future events that concern himself. Only Christ did, because he did not have the Holy Spirit in a limited way. Thus Isaac the great prophet was deceived in Jacob. So it is not to be wondered at in an apostle if he does not know.

Then he ends his letter with a greeting, and first on the part of others, second on his own. He says, they send you greetings, and we read of them at the end of Colossians. But this can be doubted since he mentions Demas. How can this be, since he said in 2. Timothy 3:8, 'For Demas has deserted me, loving this world'? How, then, can he use his name?

It might be said that he returned to him, but this does not seem to be the case, because this letter was written after that to Timothy and here he says, *I hope that through your prayers*, and there he foretells his death, saying, 'The time of my deliverance is at hand.' Therefore it should be said that Paul was in Rome for nearly nine years, and this letter was written at the beginning, whereas the second letter to Timothy was written at the end of his life and then Demas weary of imprisonment deserted him. The letters of Paul are not arranged chronologically, because the letters to the Corinthians were written before the letter to the Romans, and this before the last letter to Timothy. That is placed first because of its matter, which is worthier. His own greeting here is the same one that ends the second letter to Timothy. Thanks be to God, amen.