

THE SECRET OF COURTESY

Philemon

INTRODUCTION:

“Common courtesy.” Ever hear the phrase? I don’t know who first used it but it implies that there are certain norms of etiquette that are shared and universal. I don’t know if that is true or not. “Please” and “Thank you” were once shared and universal norms of etiquette but they seem in short supply now. I was taught not to walk across other people’s lawns but my observation is that this convention is as outmoded as wax paper, flypaper and carbon paper.

It all leads me to believe that common courtesy isn’t all that common. But I also believe this: courtesy is a common characteristic of healthy homes.

If common courtesy is so uncommon, how can we learn it? Did you know that there is a book in the New Testament that has been described as a model for Christian courtesy? It is the book of Philemon.

Philemon is one of those little letters. It is also one of those New Testament epistles that was written to an individual rather than to a congregation or to all of the churches in a certain region.

In the little letter of Philemon, we can learn a lot about courtesy. Among other things, we can learn:

I. THE IMPORTANCE OF GRATITUDE

The apostle Paul was a seasoned veteran missionary. By this time in his life, he had been starting churches for many years. By this time in his life, among the earliest Christians, he had attained such a level of respect that he was almost a celebrity among the First Century believers.

His letters to churches were read, studied then shared with other churches. For some Christian, any Christian, to get a personal letter from Paul was a great honor.

One day, a man by the name of Philemon, went out to his mailbox and found that he had received a letter with Paul’s name on the return address. I suspect he would have torn open the seal with eager and trembling hands. “What is Paul writing to me about?” he would have wondered. “Maybe he wants me to join him on a mission trip. Maybe he wants me to help him start a new church. Maybe he wants me to give him some money to help him with the ministries in which he is involved. I wonder what Paul wants with me.”

When Philemon opened the letter and began to read it, he read about Paul's gratitude. Paul was grateful for some things that Philemon had done.

Paul writes:

*Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother,
To Philemon our dear friend and fellow worker, ² to Apphia our sister, to
Archippus our fellow soldier and to the church that meets in your home:
³ Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.*

*⁴ I always thank my God as I remember you in my prayers, ⁵ because I
hear about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints. ⁶ I
pray that you may be active in sharing your faith, so that you will have a
full understanding of every good thing we have in Christ. ⁷ Your love has
given me great joy and encouragement, because you, brother, have
refreshed the hearts of the saints.*

Paul addresses the letter to Philemon but he also greets "Apphia, our sister," "Archippus our fellow soldier," "and the church that meets in your home." I don't know who Apphia and Archippus are but I can't help but wonder if Apphia might be Philemon's wife and if Archippus could be their son. I don't know so don't base too much on that. I just wonder.

But whoever these people were, Paul sends his greetings to them and he lets them know he has been praying for them. Wouldn't you love to know that a prayer warrior like Paul had your name on his prayer list? What do you suppose Paul was praying about when he prayed for Philemon?

Well, we know he was giving thanks. He says he was. And he was praying that Philemon has been active in sharing his faith because the more he tells others about his faith, the more he will grow in his understanding of the things of the Lord. But Paul begins by saying that when he prays for Philemon, he gives thanks.

If courtesy is ever to become common courtesy, we must learn the importance of gratitude. Gratitude is a courtesy that grows from the soil of humility. If I believe I am better than you; if I believe you owe me something; if I believe the WORLD owes me something, I will never be a grateful person. I will believe that I deserve every blessing that ever comes my way. But if I have a humble heart, a modest spirit and an attitude of meekness, I will be able to be truly thankful for the blessings that come my way.

In Scripture, Paul variously identifies himself as a servant of Jesus Christ, a servant of the Word and a servant of the church. A person who regards himself as a servant is not a cocky, arrogant and self-centered person.

And he is one who will react with an attitude of gratitude when others extend themselves for him.

It would appear that Paul and Philemon had a relationship of some sort. They knew one another and had some shared history. Paul knew Philemon well enough and Paul was humble enough that he was grateful to Philemon for his past acts of kindness and generosity.

II. THE IMPORTANCE OF HOSPITALITY

In the greetings in the opening lines of this letter, Paul greets Philemon, Apphia and Archippus “*and the church that meets in your home.*” In Paul’s day, churches did not have church buildings. The church was the people, not a building, and the people met in the homes of believers.

How would you like for all of us to come over to your house next Sunday at 9 a.m. for Sunday School and then stay until 11, after we have worshipped? Most of us would have to be very busy cleaning the house and rearranging the furniture this week to get ready for that kind of a crowd. And I’d have to buy some grape juice, too.

Now, how would you like for us to come EVERY WEEK? That seems to have been what happened at Philemon’s house. The church met there and that would have been a heavy obligation. But Philemon was hospitable enough to open his home to the church.

Not only that, at the end of Paul’s letter, he tells Philemon to get ready to extend hospitality to him, personally. Verse 22:

²² *And one thing more: Prepare a guest room for me, because I hope to be restored to you in answer to your prayers.*

“Clean up the guest room, make up the bed and stock up some groceries because I’m hoping to come stay with you!”

When we lived in London, we lived in a small 2-room apartment. It was adequate for our needs but it was not spacious. When Bible college students and touring professors found out that we were living in London, we became a popular stopover for summer mission groups. They would want us to pick them up at the airport and drive them the 2 hours to our house. They would want to spend the night (or often, several nights while they went sight-seeing) and then drive them back to the airport.

Pretty quickly, we learned we had to begin telling them that our car only seated three people plus the driver so we couldn’t pick up an entire youth group so we would tell them how to get to us on the subway. That dissuaded a few but most came anyway.

We had one summer when, during the entire summer, I doubt if we slept in our own bed more than half a dozen nights. We stumbled over bodies and backpacks strewn over the floor. Sandy bought tons of groceries and fixed an enormous number of meals on a tiny apartment-sized stove that had two burners and an oven the size of a VW glove-box. We went into debt to feed these uninvited guests and we couldn't wait for them all to leave. And that's the truth.

That is the sad truth. I did not have a very hospitable attitude. I felt like I was being taken advantage of. I didn't know these people and they didn't know me. We weren't friends. They just wanted a place to sleep and a few free meals. They didn't care about me and I resented it.

Looking back, I realize that, instead of thinking about how inconvenient this all was, I should have realized that what I was doing, I was doing for the Lord. Jesus said that if we give so much as a cup of cold water in his name, we have secured our reward. Jesus said that inasmuch as we have done some act of service to one of the least of these, we have done it to Jesus, himself. For the Christian, hospitality is extending kindness as if we were doing it for Jesus.

Paul reminded Philemon of his hospitality. He allowed the church to meet in his home and Paul told him that he hoped to come stay with him and experience that hospitality for himself. But there is one other act of hospitality that Paul requests. And it is the real purpose for him writing this letter.

Paul had become acquainted with a runaway slave by the name of Onesimus. Onesimus had been one of Philemon's slave but he ran away from his master and ended up with Paul while Paul was in a Roman prison.

During the time that Onesimus was with Paul, Paul led him to Jesus and baptized him. Now Paul wants to send Onesimus back to Philemon, his master. And Paul asks Philemon to receive him, not as a slave but as a brother in Christ.

By law, Philemon could have killed Onesimus for having run away. Or, like a hog that won't stay in the pen, he could have sold him to someone else. Paul asks Philemon to go beyond what he is entitled to do and to actually extend hospitality to this slave and receive him back as a brother in Christ.

I would think that would have been hard to do. Paul was asking a lot from Philemon. An awful lot!! The only way Philemon could ever extend such generous hospitality would be if he regarded himself as a servant (not the

master) and if he regarded the one in need as Jesus. Then and only then can a person extend genuine hospitality. Otherwise, it is just food and shelter.

III. THE IMPORTANCE OF TACT

When Paul asked Philemon to receive back his runaway slave, Onesimus, Paul was asking a great deal. For one slave to rebel and get away with it might reasonably lead to a full-scale revolt among the other slaves in Philemon's household. It might spread rebellion among all the slaves in a town or in a region. From Philemon's point of view, I could understand that he might feel that Onesimus needed to be put in his place and there needed to be consequences for his actions.

Paul would have agreed: Onesimus needed to be put in his place and there needed to be consequences for his actions. But his place was now that of being a brother in Christ. And the consequences needed to be that he be received as a brother and restored to his position.

In saying that he should be restored to his position, Paul was saying that he should be restored to his position as a slave. Paul was not advocating that Onesimus be granted his freedom because he was now a Christian. Paul was saying he should be received as a slave and regarded as a brother.

To make his point, Paul uses a little play on words. The name "Onesimus" means "useful". Paul says he was useless to you but now he will be useful. Paul wanted Onesimus to be given a second chance to live up to his name.

Paul made his appeal with great tact. Notice his approach:

⁸Therefore, although in Christ I could be bold and order you to do what you ought to do, ⁹yet I appeal to you on the basis of love. I then, as Paul—an old man and now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus—¹⁰I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, who became my son while I was in chains. ¹¹Formerly he was useless to you, but now he has become useful both to you and to me.

"Although I could be bold and order you to do the right thing...I appeal on the basis of love...I'm an old man and a prisoner for Christ Jesus..." Old Paul is laying it on thick! What he is doing is taking a tactful (not subtle but tactful) approach to try to persuade Philemon to do the right thing voluntarily. Note verses 17-19

¹⁷So if you consider me a partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. ¹⁸If he has done you any wrong or owes you anything, charge it to me. ¹⁹I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand. I will pay it back—not to mention that you owe me your very self.

I don't know why it is that Philemon owed his life to Paul but Paul was not above pointing that out and calling in the favor to aid Onesimus in his return to Philemon.

All of these are examples of Paul's tact in trying to persuade Philemon to do the right thing. And while Paul acknowledges that he could have ordered Philemon to receive Onesimus, Paul knew that a courteous, tactful approach would more likely achieve success. That is a lesson most of us need to learn.

CONCLUSION:

Erastus Wiman, the famous journalist and businessman, said, *"Nothing is ever lost by courtesy. It is the cheapest of the pleasures. It costs nothing and conveys much. It pleases him who gives and him who receives, and thus, like mercy, it is twice blessed."*

Wiman is right. Nothing is ever lost by being courteous. You do not forfeit your dignity; in fact you enhance it. You do not lose your reputation; in fact you improve it. You do not erode your position; in fact you increase it. Courtesy is a long-term investment in a relationship and it brings handsome dividends...especially in the home.

In the King James translation of the Bible, I Peter 3:8 reads

⁸ *Finally, be ye all of one mind, having compassion one of another, love as brethren, be pitiful, be courteous.*

We've about mastered the art of being pitiful (only joking) but we've got a ways to go on being courteous. Wouldn't our homes be a wonderful place to start practicing common courtesy?

INVITATION: #670 – *"Make Me a Blessing"*