

TO BREAK DOWN WALLS

Letter to Philemon



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Reflections on Philemon

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The Walls Are Falling

Introduction to Philemon

I still remember the terrifying stories of the infamous wall in Berlin. The communists built this wall to separate the West from the East. Behind that wall, the most terrible things happened, especially to Christian believers. Christianity was not welcome there at all, and anyone who would try to live out his faith there was brutally persecuted.

Visitors to the red world behind the wall were rare, and they were viewed with great suspicion. The stories that people like Rev. Dana Minnaar and Brother Andrew told, made your hair stand on end. They were smugglers! They smuggled in Bibles for the believers behind the Iron Curtain.

Although visitors were allowed, the residents were not allowed to go out, for fear that they would leave Russia. The terrible wall separated families from each other, and anyone who would dare to flee was shot dead in cold blood!

And then the wall fell!

There was great joy when the Berlin Wall was torn down that day, the 9th November 1989 and people could move freely through again!

Read more about this wall at:
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Berlin_Wall

There are so many walls and fences in life that separate and confine us and divide us into little compartments. Indeed, our walls are not made of brick and concrete, but they are figurative walls that we ourselves have erected, walls that separate people from one another: walls of culture, race, status, wealth, poverty. These same walls usually also become walls between us and God. Christ came as the One who comes to break down such walls. He breaks down the divisions that sin brought and that separate us from God. He also breaks down the walls that separate people from each other, and opens up and frees your narrow, limited world so that you can breathe and move spiritually and live

your life to the fullest.

Paul wrote this letter while in prison, physically confined by suffocating prison walls, but spiritually as free as the wind! He writes the letter to a spiritual leader in the congregation in Colosse, Philemon, a Greek landowner. This rich man made his house available to the congregation, so that they could meet there regularly. He had a slave named Onesimus who absconded, and his path somehow crossed with that of Paul. There he was converted. Paul convinces Onesimus that one cannot run away from one's problems, but that he had to go back to his owner. And now he writes this letter to Philemon to ask that he forgive Onesimus for his cowardly act and accept him as a fellow-believer. He must therefore not allow the social walls that have been built over the years, and especially now strengthened even more with Onesimus's running away, to come between them. They must experience and live out their unity in Christ despite the walls.

Although Paul addresses the letter personally to Philemon and speaks to him personally, he also asks that the whole congregation read the letter. So what applies to Philemon and Onesimus also applies to the rest of the congregation and also to each of us today. The personal letter that Paul wrote to Philemon is a beautiful example of such a liberation that breaks down walls. It is also extremely tactfully written, and it shows us very clearly how Christ's power can completely transform a person's life and his relationship with other people.

Paul does not for a moment try to overthrow the norms and standards of society. Slavery is indeed an evil, but Paul does not say a word against it, because it would certainly just be a waste of breath. What Paul does do is to ask the owner of a slave to look at his slave with new eyes - Christian eyes. This slave of his is a believer, and is therefore his brother in Christ. Indeed, his slave ran away - deserted, and it could have cost him the death penalty, but now Paul pleads for the

slave, Onesimus, because he has since converted. He asks Philemon to enter into a new relationship with his slave. Indeed, the slave still remains his slave, and he who is Philemon remains the master, but a new commonality has come between them that bridges the terrible gap between master and slave: in the Lord they are now brothers, both have God as their Father.

In our own society today, there are so many differences of opinion that are much more complex than that of Philemon and Onesimus, such as colour and cultural prejudices. If someone has a different colour than you, you already have your prejudices long before you get to know them as a person. Other walls that a person builds for themselves are those of status, wealth, education, way of thinking, sexual orientation or a particular personality trait. In this letter, God calls me and you to experience and actually live out the unity and childhood in Christ with other people, who may be different from us, just like Philemon. Let's

break down the walls and treat those separated fellow-believers as our brothers and sisters in the Lord.

Prayer:

Lord, there are so many walls in my life - Please help me break them down and accept my fellow-believers as brothers and sisters.

Co-workers in the Kingdom

Philemon 1:1-3

Breaking down walls is not quite so simple! I don't just decide one fine day that I'm going to demolish a wall, and then I climb in with the sledgehammer? No, such demolishing requires a thorough motivation in the first place. I have to decide why it is necessary to tear down the wall. And then, even more important, I don't just break down a wall because I'm angry with it. I do this because it is absolutely necessary. Furthermore, I have to make absolutely sure that it won't cause damage elsewhere.

I once saw a ten-storey building being demolished in Durban. There were months of careful calculations and planning by engineers and explosives experts beforehand. When the day came that the building had to fall, there was only a small explosion, and then the entire massive building collapsed slowly and gently without even breaking a single window of the

surrounding buildings! The demolishing process must be done with great care.

It was exactly the same for Paul with Philemon. He must have planned for a long time before he wrote this letter, because it had to break down walls - spiritual walls, and it was an extremely sensitive matter! He had to proceed very carefully so that he did not cause damage in the process. The Man to whom he is writing was a great asset to the Kingdom of God, and Paul wanted to keep it that way.

Paul was in prison at the time, but he did not work alone. In the preface of the letter, he writes that Timothy is his co-author. He was also co-author of the two Thessalonian letters, 2 Corinthians, Philippians and Colossians. He played a very big role in Paul's life.

But why does Paul use Timothy? What made him such a special person, that Paul used him as a co-author of his letters?

Paul got to know him on his second

missionary journey, and immediately saw that this young man had great potential. He was of mixed origin - his mother was Jewish and his father a Greek. Paul trusted Timothy to such an extent that he sent him to visit the congregation in Thessalonica on his behalf. Later there were big problems in Corinth, and once again it was Timothy who had to go and put out fires. Finally, Paul left Timothy behind in Ephesus to serve and build up that young congregation as a pastor.

Isn't it wonderful when someone is sent your way that you can fully trust? Someone you can confide in, with even your biggest problems! What a wonderful privilege it is, if you and I can be that person for someone and that it can be said of us that we can mean so much to someone who is in the ministry. This makes the preaching of the Gospel easy for him, and even if you are not even someone who preaches the Word, you still have a direct part in carrying out the gospel.

However, this letter from Paul is not about Timothy, but about someone else who was just as important in his congregation: Philemon. He was converted through Paul's ministry in Colossae. If we read between the lines, it seems as if he was a wealthy man, a Greek landowner. In those years, there were no church buildings yet, and the congregations were therefore forced to gather at people's homes, but also out of fear of persecution. We can assume that Philemon had a very large house, and that he was not stingy in making his house available to the congregation. So they often gathered there to hold church services. Paul had great respect for Philemon and for what he was willing to do for the congregation. He also states in his letter that he often prays for Philemon, and that he is very grateful to the Lord for Philemon.

Paul calls Philemon his friend and "collaborator". We do not know if Philemon preached the Word, but even by making his house available for people to hold church

services there, he is already a collaborator.

The question is, to what extent are we "co-workers" in the Kingdom of God? Do we just read the Bible and a daily devotion, pray and go to church? Or are we actively involved in one way or another?

Three people we read about this morning lived out Jesus' love practically: Paul, Timothy and Philemon. This morning I want to appeal to you to do the same. Be creative and find ways to express love.

Prayer:

Lord, please open my eyes and show me how I can radiate Your wonderful love to the world out there in a practical way!

Love In Practice

Philemon 1:4-7

Are there different stages of love that a believer must live out? Now I'm actually treading on dangerous ground and we've had heated debates on this question!

When the Scribes ask Jesus what the greatest commandment is, he answers that you must love God, but also love your neighbour as yourself. Later He tells His disciples to love even their enemies, and to pray for those who persecute them. It's definitely not easy! In John 15:12, however, Jesus urgently talks to His disciples about love: "This is My commandment:" Jesus said to the men, a few hours before He was imprisoned, "You must love one another, just as I have loved you."

The question is whether there is a difference in the love I live out towards a believer, an unbeliever and an enemy? If I truly live out the love that Jesus asks of me, then I will treat everyone who comes my way with

selfless love. However, a fellow-believer has a special bond with me: we are family - blood family in Jesus! Let me explain: If I meet a stranger in the street, I will greet him kindly. However, if it is a family member, I will hug him and even kiss him and embrace him. It is this kind of brotherly love that Jesus is talking about here. And this is the same love Paul is talking about when he tells Philemon that he is so grateful to the Lord for seeing that kind of love in Philemon.

The question is, what does the love I live out towards my fellow-believers look like? Oh yes, there are fellow-believers who make it very easy for me to love them with a warm brotherly love. But then there are the guys who make it hard for me to truly love them. It is precisely on these people that I really have to work to live out my love as Jesus commanded. Just think: He loved Peter deeply, despite the fact that Peter had denied Him. He loved Matthew dearly despite the fact that he was a publican and hung out with a lot of bad characters for friends. He loves

me despite the fact that I don't even come close to living as He asks of me!

Shouldn't you and I make an extra effort to unconditionally love that brother or sister of ours who is a pain to us? Even if his religious beliefs are so different from mine?

In Paul's prayer for Philemon, he also touches on another extremely important point, namely that his "participation in the faith may be effective, through your knowledge of every good cause that is among us, to the glory of Christ." (v. 6). A believer cannot live alone and grow spiritually at the same time! You need other believers to help you grow and help broaden your insight. By doing, for example, intensive Bible study, you will possibly broaden your knowledge, but it is only when you share and discuss what you have read with other believers, that it really begins to gain value for you, as for example in a Bible study group.

Through conversation, the theoretical things you learn usually transfer to their practical

implementation, and then your faith gets feet and life. With this, Paul wants to make an urgent appeal to us to get actively involved in our congregation's activities. Become part of the Bible study or cell group; participate in outreach actions etc.

Philemon participated in his congregation's activities in a very concrete and practical way, and not only did everyone benefit from that, but the bonus for him was that he himself grew spiritually through this. He grew so much, that Paul had the full boldness to be able to take up this very thorny matter of his slave who had grown up with him, without being afraid for one moment that Philemon would interpret it wrongly or be petty about it!

Like the other rich people of his time, Philemon certainly had a few slaves - slaves that he had to buy at great cost. Such a slave was his property, and as with any other property, he could do whatever he wanted with the slave. By absconding, this slave could receive the death penalty - it was a

very serious offence! Paul wanted to prevent Philemon from acting irresponsibly.

However, Paul was aware of Philemon's good qualities, and therefore he pointed them out, and that he had to use them in this situation. Paul mentions no less than twice in one paragraph that wonderful quality of true brotherly love that stood out in Philemon's life. He testifies that Philemon's love truly radiated in a very practical way, not just by telling someone that he loved him, but by living it practically. Through his love, Philemon refreshed people's hearts!

This morning I want to appeal to you to cultivate the same outlook on life as Philemon. Be as creative as that beautiful person, and look for ways to express love. Especially radiate true brotherly love towards all fellow-believers who come your way!

Prayer:

Lord, please open my eyes and show me how I can practically radiate Your wonderful love to my fellow-believers, even those who

make it difficult for me!

Coercion versus Free Will

Philemon 8-14

Forcing a stubborn donkey to do what you want him to do is almost an impossible task. Contrary to what most people think, a donkey is definitely not a stupid animal, he is probably the smartest of all the farm animals!

Dad used to ride such a clever donkey to school in his childhood. In those years, there were no school buses, and they were very poor. In the mornings, when it was time to leave for school, the donkey had just disappeared, totally missing! Then Dad first had to go looking for the silly animal. He once caught the donkey lying flat next to the barbed wire fence, sailing on its side under the wire to escape! It usually took a lot of persuading to get him back into gear to walk to school when he finally located the donkey! Hitting him or scolding him for his abominable act didn't help much, because then he was so stubborn that you could get absolutely nothing out of him. A lot of flattery

was the secret to make him walk where he needed to walk.

But Dad says that this "stupid" animal knew exactly what day of the week it was, because every Saturday morning before dawn he was at the house, and then he bayed incessantly for a bite of lucern! Of course he knew that there was no work on Saturdays! Dad's donkey was not shy, but rather lazy. The difficult road to school every morning was not fun because he was forced to do it.

Paul understood a certain aspect of how a person's brain works, very well. You don't want to be forced to do something, because then you become like Dad's stubborn donkey, and you keep running away from your obligations. Paul knew very well that if you can be persuaded to do something out of your own free will, then it becomes a pleasure or even a passion for you, and then you are like that donkey that does not run away on Saturdays but walks around the house, nibbling.

For example, a preacher who preaches about sin and threatens you with fire and brimstone, only instills fear in people. Some people will listen to him and come to other insights out of sheer fear. However, if the preacher delivers an inspiring sermon on the same subject, and the great sacrifice that Jesus made, and how much He paid for you, then he touches your heart. If he then challenges you to renounce sin of your own free will, out of gratitude for Jesus' work, then it becomes a pleasure and even a great passion for you to get away from sin!

And that is exactly what Paul is doing here. Paul spoke with great authority, and everyone listened to what he said. So if Paul would have ordered Philemon to take Onesimus back and treat him well, Philemon would most likely have done it, but only out of compulsion because the great missionary Paul had ordered him to do so. There would never have been any talk of a good relationship between Philemon and Onesimus, because the stigma of a slave

who had absconded, would always have stuck to him.

However, Paul instead pleads with Philemon to look at Onesimus through new eyes. He is under no pressure, but Paul asks him if he would please consider taking Onesimus back. Then Paul explains that once upon a time Onesimus was only a slave - not even a very good slave, because he had grown old and he was therefore useless. But now he is willing to go back to his former master of his own free will, this time as a useful slave and a fellow-believer!

If you rely on your position of authority to persuade or even force someone else to do something, it usually fails, even if the matter seems very right to you. It may work in the short term, but in the long run it will fail. Coercion makes people sneaky, because they try to see where they can get around your law afterwards. On the other hand, it doesn't help to play on someone's "guilty conscience" to try to move him to other

insights. Making you feel guilty about a matter will also only work for a short time, until you have learned to soothe your conscience.

However, if you can persuade the other person that your point of view is in line with what the Lord wants for us, and motivate him to do it out of his own free will, then it will work, because then it is no longer your compulsion but his own passion that makes him do the right thing. The secret is that you have to motivate the person in such a way that he will look forward to doing it, and that it will be fun for him. An example is these devotionals that I write: for me it is not a task or a job, but a passion! I look forward to doing it, and it's fun for me. Here I live out my faith – out of my own free will!

My plea to you, dear reader, is that you will also develop a passion to work for Jesus in your own area - of your own free will, and not because you were forced to do so. Pray about the matter, and ask the Lord to show

you what you can do for Him. And that day when you have the answer - do it with great enthusiasm!

Prayer:

Lord, please awaken a passion in me to work for You, and please show me the right path!

Good Investments

Philemon 15-25

If one has capital, then it is good to make an investment. Let's say you get a large amount of money (perhaps an inheritance), then you're not just going to hide it in the black box under the bed. You're going to do something with it. If you are smart, you will consider your options and see where you can make the best investment so that good interest is earned on your money, and your investment is safe at the same time.

But money is not the only thing you can invest: if you have received some good talent in life, you are going to similarly examine it thoroughly, consider it and invest it in the best way. Let's say your gift is computer programming. Then there are several options to "invest" it. For example, you can go and work for a large company and earn a good salary with your talent. Or you can start your own business, and with tactful planning build up a successful business.

However, there is also a third type of investment - a spiritual investment. You can reinvest the salvation you received from Jesus in other people. The interest you "earn" in this way is of eternal value, and is worth much more than any earthly investment. Paul knew a lot about this kind of investment, and he invested his "spiritual money" just where he could. Some of his investments were extremely successful and earned quite a lot of "interest"!

In this scripture we read about two of Paul's thousands of investments that he made. The first was only a relatively new small investment, but already it started earning interest: Onesimus! He found Onesimus as a worthless runaway slave with probably another price on his head as well. Not only was he a slave, but also a total heathen! However, Paul looked past all these negative dirty clothes and saw in Onesimus the potential of a good investment.

It may have been a very risky investment in

some people's eyes! But what did he have to lose? Absolutely nothing!

And so Paul jumps to work there in the prison and begins to work on Onesimus. Before long, this piece of useless, unsatisfied person becomes a brand new, useful believer who pays his first interest by assisting Paul in prison out of pure gratitude for what Paul has done for him!

However, Paul looked much further than his own needs, because back with his boss, Philemon, Onesimus could earn even more interest for the kingdom. There he would no longer be just an ordinary, useless, everyday slave who threatens to abscond, but a useful, believing slave, who now becomes part of his master's spiritual family. The English proverb says: "Put your money where your mouth is." Paul was willing to do so, and even offered to compensate Philemon for any harm Onesimus might have caused him.

However, we read of a second investment that Paul had made several years before.

This investment has already earned bags of interest: Philemon. When Paul met Philemon, he was a typical arrogant Greek landowner who probably whiled away his time by hanging around the idol temples. A licentious life of brasserie and flirting with the temple prostitutes was the order of the day, especially for people like Philemon who could afford such things. Then Paul came into his life, and everything changed. Paul simply knew that this could be a very rewarding investment, and he was certainly not disappointed. See, when Philemon let his life be led by the Holy Spirit, he made his property and time available to other people so that a niche could be created where believers could gather safely to worship. In this way, Paul's investment earned interest upon interest.

Paul now reminds Philemon of this investment he made, and that he should not forget it if Onesimus comes to him again. Perhaps he should see Onesimus' desertion as a period in which Onesimus had to be

recreated from a useless slave to a beloved brother. "Please make my heart happy", Paul pleads with Philemon.

Have you already found Jesus' love in your life, received His complete forgiveness and remittance? I trust you have already received it! That's why I'm asking you this morning - no, I'm pleading with you - to make the biggest investment you can ever make in your life. It's an investment without any risks and with absolutely unlimited interest. Use the talents you have to spread the Gospel to the wicked world out there.

Sit down and plan thoroughly - pray that the Holy Spirit will show you in what way you can spread the Word. Remember: a good investment requires research and planning, and so does investing in the Kingdom of God. Start with a small investment, and then "venture" bigger and bigger until you can make investments left and right fearlessly and with full confidence like Paul.

Prayer:

Lord, please show me where the possibilities lie for spiritual investments, and give me the confidence to invest freely in Your kingdom!

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