

PAUL'S VIEWPOINT

STUDIES IN PHILEMON #3

When Terry Dobson got on the train, his car was relatively empty. Just a few couples, a mother with some children in tow and an old man sitting in the corner. Terry settled down in his seat for an anticipated hour of peace and quiet. But at the next stop, Terry's quiet afternoon was suddenly going to end. An obviously drunk man staggered into his car. He wore laborer's clothing covered with dirt and sweat. Instead of settling down into a seat, he stood in the center of the car shouting obscenities at all of the passengers.

Now Terry was a 20 year old man who was in excellent physical condition. He had spent the past 3 years studying Akido, a form of Karate. He could grapple and throw with the best of his fellow students. He had never had opportunity to actually use his martial arts training in a real fight, and part of him wanted to try out his skills. *Perhaps this is the time, he reasoned. If I don't take some action, some innocent women or children might get hurt.*

Terry stood to his feet attracting the attention of the obnoxious intruder. *What do you want punk,* the drunken man snarled. *Maybe you need a lesson in manners.* Terry just stood his ground silently. But the look of disgust on his face and the sneer on his lips just invited the inebriated man to try something. *Alright. You're going to get a lesson from me,* the drunk man yelled, as he prepared to rush Terry.

Hey. The exclamation cut through the tension like a knife. *Hey there, come over here and talk to me.* The worker staggered around to look at the small, old

man who was sitting in the corner of the car. *What do you want old man?* the intruder crudely asked. *I just want to talk to you for a while. I'll bet you had a hard day at work. I'll bet you are looking forward to getting home to your wife and children.* the elderly man continued.

Within just a few minutes tears were streaming down the crude intruder's face. *My wife had died a few months ago. We didn't have any children. I feel so alone.*

As Terry Dobson looked on from the seat to which he had returned, he marvelled at the insight and tact of this old man. Terry had planned to take care of this situation. But this other man had not only taken care of the problem, he had provided a solution as well. The two were still talking as Terry got off the train at his stop.

In the opening paragraph of his famous Sermon on the Mount, the Lord Jesus Christ said, *Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called the sons of God.* This was certainly an interesting concept that Jesus was giving to his disciples. It must have taken them off guard in light of their belief that the Messiah had come to overthrow the Roman Empire and set up an earthly kingdom of his own. But I'm sure that Christ's meaning became clearer as they meditated on his statement. The Messiah had been sent by God the Father to be a peacemaker - to bring humans back into fellowship with God again. The Lord Jesus Christ would do this by becoming both a sin and peace offering on the cross of Calvary. The Apostle Paul understood the significance of Christ's role as a peacemaker when he wrote in Romans 5:1, *Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace*

with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. So Jesus Christ was simply telling his followers that they would be like God as they were active in being peacemakers. A son reflects the image of his parents. So as Christ's followers were active in being peacemakers, they would be called the sons of God. As they were active in mediating peace between others, they would reflect the character and redemptive activity of God himself.

We have been looking at the brief Epistle of Paul to a Christian leader in Colossae named Philemon.

*We have already looked at this letter from Philemon's viewpoint. Philemon was a mature Christian man who had been wronged. He was responsible before God to forgive the injustice that he suffered as Christ had forgiven him and accept his servant, Onesimus, back again.

*Last week, we looked at this letter from Onesimus' viewpoint. Onesimus was the servant who had stolen from Philemon and then run away. Onesimus is an example of godly repentance to us. He had admitted his sin, accepted the forgiveness that God offers through the Lord Jesus Christ, and had returned to Philemon to make restitution for what he had done wrong.

*Now this morning we come to view this situation from the Apostle Paul's viewpoint. Paul is an example of a Christian Mediator - a peacemaker. Paul is the one who is assisting in the reconciliation of Onesimus to Philemon. What lessons can we learn from Paul's example this morning? Let's look at 4 principles that we can learn from Paul as we leaf through this brief letter together.

1. First, I would invite you to notice with me the fact that Paul maintained a

delicate balance when dealing with Onesimus and Philemon. On the one hand, Paul was firm in his convictions to do what was right. But while he was committed to do what was right, he also showed a sensitivity in dealing with people. He was careful to consider their feelings and to try to understand the situation through their eyes. READ vs. 8,9

PHM 1:8 Therefore, although in Christ I could be bold and order you to do what you ought to do, ⁹ yet I appeal to you on the basis of love. . .

Now there were 2 extremes that Paul could have taken in this situation. Either extreme would have likely hindered the positive outcome that occurred.

Paul could have just avoided any conflict at all. He could have ignored the whole matter of sending Onesimus back to Philemon. He could have decided that he just wouldn't get involved. After all, Philemon would never have known. Philemon didn't have any idea of where Onesimus was. The last place that Philemon would have looked for Onesimus was with the Apostle Paul in jail. Paul could have rejoiced in Onesimus' salvation, and sent him on his way choosing not to become involved in the internal affairs of Philemon's household. He could have chosen to avoid conflict at all cost. Many people choose this path when confronted with difficult situations - just avoid conflict at all cost.

The other extreme that Paul could have chosen was to become very aggressive in his involvement. After all, he was the Apostle Paul. He had lead both Philemon and Onesimus to the Lord. He was the spiritual father here. He could have taken the approach that he would dictate what was going to be done and how it would be done. But Paul avoided either extreme, didn't he? He

chose to become involved. He made that choice because he knew that it was the loving thing to do for both Philemon and Onesimus. Philemon had been wronged. It was the right thing to make that wrong right again. And Onesimus, even though he had come to faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, would be stifled in his growth and burdened with the guilt of always looking over his shoulder if he didn't face this situation and make it right again. Yes, Onesimus needed a little catalyst to encourage him in this process. But it was for his own good, for his personal and spiritual growth. Paul knew that the right thing needed to be done here.

But Paul also knew that Philemon might have deep feelings about this situation. Philemon and his whole household had been violated. Paul had no idea as to the repercussions that this situation might have had in Philemon's house. Paul knew that Philemon would have to wrestle with this decision and make it for himself. Paul, in the final analysis couldn't make it for him. So Paul insisted upon doing the right thing; but he chose to do it in a way that showed respect for all the people involved.

Most often, peacekeeping ventures fail because we either compromise on doing the right thing or try to force the right thing in our timing on people without respecting their feelings and integrity. We either choose a path of moral compromise just to get peace at any cost or try to push what is right on people without being sensitive to the depth of their feelings just to make ourselves feel better. The Apostle Paul is a model for us in the necessity for keeping both of these considerations in balance. He did what was right. But he didn't command it; rather he appealed to Philemon on the basis of love.

In contrast to Paul's example, do you remember Rehoboam's attempts at maintaining the peace and unity of the nation of Israel after his father's death. Solomon inherited a glorious and powerful kingdom from his father David. But by the time of Solomon's death, he had squandered the nation's resources like someone squeezing a wet sponge in his hand. Solomon had taxed the people so heavily for his massive building projects and luxurious lifestyle that they were ready to rebel under this horrible yoke of oppression. So when Solomon's son, Rehoboam assumed the throne, some serious peacekeeping was needed. But Rehoboam wasn't up to the task. In fact, he made 2 very serious mistakes. Notice them with me from 1 Kings 12:1-19.

READ 1 KINGS 12:1-19.

1KI 12:1 Rehoboam went to Shechem, for all the Israelites had gone there to make him king. ² When Jeroboam son of Nebat heard this (he was still in Egypt, where he had fled from King Solomon), he returned from Egypt. ³ So they sent for Jeroboam, and he and the whole assembly of Israel went to Rehoboam and said to him: ⁴ "Your father put a heavy yoke on us, but now lighten the harsh labor and the heavy yoke he put on us, and we will serve you."

1KI 12:5 Rehoboam answered, "Go away for three days and then come back to me." So the people went away.

1KI 12:6 Then King Rehoboam consulted the elders who had served his father Solomon during his lifetime. "How would you advise me to answer these people?" he asked.

1KI 12:7 They replied, "If today you will be a servant to these people and serve them and give them a favorable answer, they will always be your servants."

1KI 12:8 But Rehoboam rejected the advice the elders gave him and consulted the young men who had grown up with him and were serving him. ⁹

He asked them, "What is your advice? How should we answer these people who say to me, 'Lighten the yoke your father put on us'?"

1KI 12:10 The young men who had grown up with him replied, "Tell these people who have said to you, 'Your father put a heavy yoke on us, but make our yoke lighter'--tell them, 'My little finger is thicker than my father's waist.

¹¹ My father laid on you a heavy yoke; I will make it even heavier. My father scourged you with whips; I will scourge you with scorpions.' "

1KI 12:12 Three days later Jeroboam and all the people returned to Rehoboam, as the king had said, "Come back to me in three days." ¹³ The king answered the people harshly. Rejecting the advice given him by the elders, ¹⁴ he followed the advice of the young men and said, "My father made your yoke heavy; I will make it even heavier. My father scourged you with whips; I will scourge you with scorpions." ¹⁵ So the king did not listen to the people, for this turn of events was from the LORD, to fulfill the word the LORD had spoken to Jeroboam son of Nebat through Ahijah the Shilonite.

1KI 12:16 When all Israel saw that the king refused to listen to them, they answered the king:

"What share do we have in David,
what part in Jesse's son?

To your tents, O Israel!

Look after your own house, O David!"

So the Israelites went home. ¹⁷ But as for the Israelites who were living in the towns of Judah, Rehoboam still ruled over them.

1KI 12:18 King Rehoboam sent out Adoniram, who was in charge of forced labor, but all Israel stoned him to death. King Rehoboam, however, managed to get into his chariot and escape to Jerusalem. ¹⁹ So Israel has been in rebellion against the house of David to this day.

Did you notice Rehoboam's 2 big mistakes?

*first, he didn't do what was right. He didn't listen to the wise counsel of his elders to become a servant to the people, but he rather listened to the greed of his

younger advisors who counseled an aggressive, harsher approach. The older advisors knew the legitimacy of the people's complaints. They had seen Solomon squeeze these people. They knew that the people were making a reasonable request. But Rehoboam in his personal greed chose a selfish path over the right path.

*second, of all the people to send to try to mediate the problem, Rehoboam sends Adoniram, the head of forced labor. This was the man who had enslaved these people and driven them mercilessly under Solomon. This move shows a complete insensitivity to the people's feelings - a complete lack of respect for them.

*And Rehoboam's decision to not do what was right and to not show respect for the people lead to the division of the nation of Israel for the rest of her recorded history in the Bible.

Both a commitment to do what is right and a sensitivity to the feelings of people are essential if lasting mediation is to be achieved.

2. But let's move to a second lesson which we can learn from Paul. PAUL WAS SO COMMITTED TO THIS TASK OF MEDIATION THAT HE WAS WILLING TO SACRIFICE PERSONALLY FOR THE CAUSE. READ VS. 17-19a.

PHM 1:17 So if you consider me a partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. ¹⁸ If he has done you any wrong or owes you anything, charge it to me. ¹⁹ I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand. I will pay it back

Now this is an amazing commitment that Paul makes here considering his

situation. As we mentioned last week, Onesimus probably was in no position to make immediate restitution for what he had taken from Philemon. Likely, he had squandered whatever he had stolen getting to Rome and living in the city before he met Paul. In fact, God might have used Onesimus' coming to the end of his resources to bring him to his senses and to seek out the Apostle Paul in jail. So the restitution that Onesimus could offer Philemon would be long-range. He would become useful as a member of the household in the long run. Paul might have even had to give Onesimus money to make the trip back to Colossae in Asia Minor. But Paul knew that Philemon could demand immediate restitution from Onesimus. So Paul guarantees that restitution himself. He signs the IOU with his own hand. I will repay it.

Now when you consider Paul's situation here, this is quite a commitment, isn't it? Paul told the church at Philippi that he knew how to live in poverty and he also knew how to live in comparative wealth. This was one of those times in Paul's life where he was living in poverty. He was in jail. It was house arrest so he had to provide for his own meals and rent. But he was not able to aggressively work. So Paul couldn't have had a lot of money to spare himself. Yet he was so committed to this reconciliation that he was willing to sacrifice personally.

If we are going to be committed to the role of peacekeeping, it is going to take some personal sacrifice. Now it usually isn't financial sacrifice, although that well might be the case. But there will always be an emotional toll, there usually will be a great sacrifice of time and energy that is required, and there might be many other sacrifices which will be asked of us as well. But the sacrifices will be

worth it. For when we dedicate ourselves to the task of mediating peace, we are engaging in a task that is close to the heart of God.

3. There is a 3rd lesson which we can learn from Paul. PAUL THOUGHT THE HIGHEST OF HIS BROTHERS IN CHRIST. READ VS. 21

²¹ Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I ask.

Now this principle is important for us to note, for we all have a natural tendency to do just the opposite. We all have a tendency to be disillusioned or discouraged when there are problems. Rather than seeing the situation through God's eyes as to what can become out of the conflict, we have a tendency to be overwhelmed by the seeming impossibilities of the situation.

We can imagine Paul thinking, *Not Philemon. Not problems in his household. Anyone but Philemon. Philemon is one of the leading Christian leaders in the whole Asia Minor area. What if word of this problems spreads throughout the city of Colossae? What is that going to do to the testimony of the church in his house? How could Philemon let me down like this?*

But Paul, rather than thinking the worst of Philemon and this situation, thought the best of him. Paul realized that God could bring glory to himself out of this situation. What a beautiful testimony this would be to not only the church but to the entire city if this potentially disastrous situation could be rectified with Christian grace. If confession of wrong was offered and received, if forgiveness was extended and taken, if harmony and unity was restored, God would receive honor and glory.

We need to constantly remember the fact that nobody is immune to problems.

There is no family, no matter how godly, that is exempt from internal struggles. We are all sinners saved by grace. We are all under construction spiritually. None of us have arrived at our glorified state yet. But every single one of us who have been born again into the family of God has a burning desire to get there, and we are all pressing on that journey to the best of our abilities in our own way. That is one of the characteristics that separates a true believer from an unbeliever. One who has never been born again into God's family can live in a sinful environment and not be bothered by it. But a person who is truly born again into God's family will never be at peace within if he or she is out of fellowship with God. It just isn't possible. He might remain out of fellowship for some time - but he will be miserable inside because he will know in his heart that he is not in fellowship with God. If we can live in sin and be perfectly satisfied with it, we need to examine our hearts to make sure that we are members of God's family. We need to be reminded that it is not just walking an aisle or repeating a prayer that makes us a child of God, but it is a work of God in our hearts that completely changes us. The Apostle John wrote that one who is truly born again into God's family will not be satisfied practicing sin. *No one who is born of God will continue to sin, because God's seed remains in him; he cannot go on sinning, because he has been born of God. 1 John 3:9.*

Now the fact that we have this inner desire to please God and follow after what is right gives to us a foundation for thinking the best of our brothers and sisters in Christ Jesus. We don't have reason to expect the most from those in the world, but we can expect the best from our brothers and sisters in the Lord. And

we need to do that. We need to set our standards and expectations high for one another. I am convinced that we sometimes don't see the growth in our colleagues and children because we don't really expect to see it. We have become disillusioned and discouraged. It is really a lack of faith on our part. Do we really believe that God is doing that great work in their heart as well as in ours?

Paul did. He wrote this epistle fully believing that Philemon was going to do even more than he was requesting. But I can imagine what some are thinking just now. This sounds great in theory, Pastor, but let's get down to reality. Every situation doesn't end up like this one. Every Christian doesn't respond like Philemon. And that's true. So we must conclude with this final lesson.

4. PAUL REALIZED THE IMPORTANCE OF ACCOUNTABILITY.

Paul was not only an idealist, he was also a realist. He knew that while people often mean well, we all need to have accountability for our actions. So, having expressed his highest expectations for Philemon, he concludes by reminding him of one more thing.

READ vs. 22

PHM 1:22 And one thing more: Prepare a guest room for me, because I hope to be restored to you in answer to your prayers.

Philemon, when I get out of jail, I am coming to see you. I think that it will be soon, so get the guest house ready. And when I come, I am going to be very interested in how this whole matter between you and Onesimus turned out. I expect that it will turn out just fine. But I am coming by to check up on it anyway.

The Armed Forces have a saying. *You can expect only what you inspect.* Officers know that there must be accountability in order to insure productivity. Why would that be necessary? Don't our soldiers love our country? Aren't they committed to the defense of our nation? Of course our soldiers love our country. That is the reason why most of them volunteered to serve. But while most might mean well in their hearts, there is a little problem that most of us have with procrastination. And procrastination can sabotage the best of intentions.

Many of us are like the playwright, Marc Connelly, who had been commissioned to write a new play. The producer was hounding him for the finished copy so that he could get the cast assembled. *Marc, where's that play you promised? I'm working on it,* came the reply. *It's coming right along. Well, how much of it do you have done?* And in his classic answer, Connelly replied, *Well, you know the play will have 3 acts and 2 intermissions. I've already finished the 2 intermissions.*

Spiritual procrastination is a serious virus that infects the spiritual life of almost every Christian. That is why we all need some accountability.

*I have never met a true Christian who didn't want to grow in his or her knowledge of the Lord. But it is so easy to put off that devotional time when we spend time with the Lord.

*I have never met a true follower of Christ that didn't want to become a fisher of men. But it is so easy to start witnessing for the Lord tomorrow.

*I have never met a true believer in Christ who has said that it is right for a Christian to live in sin out of fellowship with God. But it is so easy to deal with

the sin question in our lives next week.

*And tomorrow or next week never seems to come. There is always a tomorrow and a next week to look forward to. And soon we find that our life is over, and we never accomplished what we had truly desired in our hearts.

*A major reason for our failure was a lack of accountability. We needed someone to have permission in our lives to come up to us and ask us about our devotional life or our witnessing patterns or that sin that they observe. If we are really serious about spiritual growth, we will want to be accountable in our lives.

Paul had a relationship with Philemon where he felt free to hold him accountable. I don't know how much this accountability affected the final outcome. I am sure that Philemon wanted to do the right thing before the Lord and fully intended to do it. But it could be that Paul's planned arrival in the near future was just the spark needed to ignite those good intentions into flaming action.

4 Principles which Paul model for us as a peace-keeper:

1. Maintain the delicate balance between always doing what is right and respecting others, being sensitive to their feelings.
2. Be committed to the task even if it means personal sacrifice is required.
3. Expect the best from other believers.
4. And hold others accountable as you, yourself, are accountable to others.

If every Christian were a peacekeeper like the Apostle Paul, how could there help but be unity and harmony in the church of Jesus Christ?