

Loving one another as Christ loves us

“I keep hearing about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all of God’s people. And I am praying that you will put into action the generosity that comes from your faith as you understand and experience all the good things we have in Christ”

(Philemon V.5. NLT Translation)

In Pauline ethics the principle is love, the pattern is Christ and the power is the Holy Spirit, all of which has already been given by the death and resurrection of Christ.

Paul’s letter to Philemon is the shortest of all the epistles. On the surface the story is about a runaway slave who evidently had robbed his master Philemon and was then was freed. This epistle is pregnant with “Kingdom Principles” – given so as to enable believers to live life in all its fullness as promised by Christ.

The story of moving from slavery into freedom very much reflects the life of all believers. Within this short narrative we note the spheres of activity relating to salvation, forgiveness, acceptance, intercession, hardship, reconciliation, fellowship and the re-defining of the human mind and heart. Over and above all of these is LOVE!

The Apostle Paul was in Rome, imprisoned and shackled when he wrote to Philemon. Despite hardship the purpose of God was not thwarted. Paul relished his spiritual freedom in Christ! His captors and guards were made aware of Christ and believers were actively and fearlessly proclaiming Christ (Phil. 1:12-14; cf. Eph. 3:12).

In the providence of God, Onesimus who was a slave met Paul in prison. In the pits of enslavement Onesimus encountered Christ, and discovered what it meant to have true freedom in Christ – the kind of freedom that he had desperately longed for.

In appealing to Philemon to set Onesimus free, Paul did not use his apostolic authority to ‘command’, but used the language of love and made his powerful plea was on the basis of their common bond of love (Phn.v 9).

Paul uses ‘family’ language in describing his relationship with Onesimus and speaks in terms of “my son” (v10) “brother” (v16) and “who is my very heart (v12) revealing the depth of his feelings.

Although slaves were members of a household they were of a lower status. In using the term “brother”, Paul makes it clear to Philemon that he expects him to treat Onesimus as an equal. What Paul was asking of Philemon is forgiveness and to receive Onesimus back into his household and into Christian fellowship – as one of them – as a brother in Christ!

Philemon himself would have known what it is to experience a new life in Christ, when as a sinner he received the undeserved blessing of God’s unconditional love and grace (Eph 1:6-7).

We are called to express the same kind of love and tact toward each other. It is the kind of love that can only flow from loving and living in obedience to the Lord (John 14:15; 1 John 5:3).

Paul often spoke of his converts as children. Paul no longer considers Onesimus as a slave, but refers to him as his “child” (Phn.v10; 1Cor. 4:14,15,16; 1Tim. 1:2; 2Tim. 1:2; Tit. 1:4; Gal. 4:19).

Indeed a vivid metaphor introducing a new relationship in Christ. The inference in this “new relationship” is that a radical transformation has taken place. We see here the redefining of human relationships.

Paul makes the contrast between Onesimus' past lowly relationship as a member of Philemon's household, as that which is "in the flesh" and the new brotherly relationship into which both men had entered as "in the Lord (v16). They now shared the same fellowship of grace and faith.

God is able to transform us into a new person by changing the way we think, if we allow Him. Only then will we know God's will for us, which is good, pleasing and perfect (Rom.12: 2). We have already been transported from the pits of enslavement into God's priestly and royal Kingdom and we are to live our lives as befit our standing (1 Pet.2:9).

God certainly had plans for Onesimus – even as a runaway slave! It is believed that he rose to the ranks of Bishop of Ephesus (c.107-17). Some fifty years after Paul wrote the letter to Philemon, Ignatius, bishop of Antioch (3rd bishop c.98-117 and student of John the Apostle) wrote a letter to the Ephesian Church in which he mentions the name Onesimus "a man of inexpressible love and your bishop in the flesh". Onesimus would have been in his 70's at the time Ignatius wrote his letter.

God has a plan for each one of us, yes even in the midst of our pain and frustrations. It is time to seriously consider redefining your relationship towards others in the body of Christ. We are all equal before God, not just in eternity, but in the here and now!

We too were once in enslaved. Mercifully, Christ redeemed and elevated us to the position of heirs and co-heirs with Him! Christ is the KING of Kings and LORD of Lords.

We belong to the Royal Kingdom and we must use this status of our royal re-birth in gracious and loving behavior towards others, whatever the differences exist in culture, class and churchmanship (1Pet. 2:3).

Everything that God has in store for us has already been established – even our ultimate perfection. Note the past tense "***For He has rescued us from the kingdom of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of His dear Son, who purchased our freedom and forgave our sins***" (Colossians 1:13-14, 22 see also 2:12-13).

The author of Hebrews calls us to move on to maturity and the deeper things of God. Spiritual maturity comes by exercising the Word of God and living it out daily in fellowship and love (Heb. 6:1-12; 10:23 See also Phil. 2:12-13).

Physical exercise releases endorphins (a substance in the brain that resemble the opiates e.g. morphine and works as "natural pain relievers"), hence the feel good factor and benefits of good health.

God has provided supernatural endorphins that far exceed the temporary emotional 'highs'. It had been medically proven that fellowship, peace, joy & laughter release endorphins! Thus when we exercise our faith empowered by love we release these endorphins that are life changing and permanent!

Love your neighbour as yourself (Gal 5:13). God loves you – begin by loving yourself. God is not unjust and will not forget how hard you work for him by demonstrating your love for God by caring for others. We are called to keep doing this "as long as life lasts". In learning to love others we reap the rewards of healing, joy and peace that exceed all understanding!

The receiving of fellow-believers is a basic Christian duty, says Paul to the Romans "***Therefore receive one another, just as Christ also received us, to the Glory of God*** (Rom 15:7). We are called to fellowship and to love one another with tender and compassionate hearts united with one mind and purpose (Phil 2:2).

Paul offered to repay Onesimus' debt and reminded Philemon of the greater debt he had before his salvation that could never be repaid. This same grace and mercy has been shown to us. Our debt was

charged to Christ and we were reconciled to God – we were set free because of God’s immeasurable love for us (Gal 5:1).

We witness in Paul’s letter to Philemon, the grace and mercy of God, who takes Onesimus out of bondage into “the glorious liberty of the children of God” (Rom 8:21). This is a powerful testimony of the compelling love of Christ in action (cf. 2Cor 5:14-21).

Having been filled with the Holy Spirit we are to live a Spirit controlled life and to be fruitful. We should live in the power of the Holy Spirit and have faith expressing itself in love (Gal5:5). We have been called to live in freedom serving one another in love.

Use your freedom to serve one another in love (Gal 4:13). We who have been born again must show our royal birth in gracious behavior towards others, whatever their differences in culture, class and churchmanship. (1 Pet 1:23). This must also be worked at bearing one another’s burdens so fulfilling the law of Christ.

Jesus commanded us to “***Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind: and your neighbour as yourself***” (Mt. 22:37; Lk. 16:27, Mt 19:19; Lev. 19:18). The source of love is God. “***God is Love and all who live in love live in God and God lives in them***” (1John 4:16)

The late Selwyn Hughes said “The energy behind most of our behavior (particularly strange or abnormal behavior) is an independent attempt to fulfill longings independent of God. If you want to know why people do the things they do keep the thought.”

Look at what love means:

Philia (friendship, platonic) love is conditional in that we choose who we will befriend. Eros (sexual) love is an emotion that can be associated with passionate love or lust, and seeks mutual gratification. In both these instances, the feelings are aroused because of what the love one is and does diminish in time.

God’s agape love for us is not evoked by what we are but by who He is – God is love (1Jn. 4:16). God loves us not because we are lovable. God’s love is unconditional seen in the sacrificial action of His only son Jesus Christ (John 3:16). He showered His love and purchased our freedom with the blood of His Son – this is the purest form and source of love! (Eph 1:7).

When filled with the Holy Spirit we are enabled to truly love our brothers and sisters not by mere words, but by actions (1John 3:16-17). Love is the ultimate power that every Christian must strive for. Agape love for our brothers and sisters is a distinguishing mark of true fellowship.

God gave us the Holy Spirit to fill our hearts with love (Rom 5:5). When we pray for the infilling of the Holy Spirit, it is the power of God’s love that fills us from which everything flows. Love covers a multitude of sins (1Pet. 4:8), we need to experience God’s love in all its fullness and love expels all fear and (1Jn.4:18).

Unbelievers will never believe God is love unless they see it in us! Without love we would be empty worthless beings making lots of noise without any substance! (1Cor 13:1).

Each one of us is part of the body of Christ and we do not relate to God in isolation! (Pet 2:9-10) but as part of the family or body with Christ as the head (Eph. 2:19, 4:15, 5:23-23; 1 Tim 3:15).

In as much as our body has many parts so it is with the body of Christ and each one of us even the weakest member has a part to play as designated by God.

As the Apostle Paul said; ***“If the foot says, “I am not a part of the body because I am not a hand,” that does not make it any less a part of the body....How strange a body would be if it had only one part! Yes there are many parts but only one body. The eye can never say to the hand, “I don’t need you.” The head can’t say to the feed, “I don’t need you.””*** (1Cor. 12: 14-21)

The only time Jesus was alone was when he withdrew to pray. So we should follow the pattern. Our Lord met with His disciples daily, taught them daily, ate with His disciples daily and they moved in packs.

Jesus chose 72 other disciples and sent them out in pairs (Luke 10:1). When Jesus ascended into heaven, the disciples met daily in their homes to worship and share their meals with great joy and enjoying the goodwill of each other and each day people were being saved and their numbers multiplied (Acts 2:46- 47).

At our recent conference, someone remarked that inviting people home for meals was an expensive affair and he could no longer afford it. It is important to note the early believers shared their meals not one giving and others receiving! When each one brings to the table a contribution, truly a feast can be had!

Thought provoking - Peter tells us to love each other deeply with all our hearts as brothers and sisters – because we have been born again not to a life that quickly ends but to eternal life! (1Pet. 1: 22-23).

We must guard the Spirit given unity...not an easy task! Pray for those who curse you, love with genuine affection, get into habit of practicing hospitality, share sorrows and joy, get rid of pride and learn to enjoy the company of ordinary people (Rom 12:9 -17; 1Thess. 4:9; Heb 13:1; 1Pet 1:22; 1Jn 5:1).

These commands applies to all believers contrary to the common belief that these are individual ministries, particularly that of hospitality! Do not be just receivers –start giving and you will fully experience the love of God from whom we derive our strength!

Paul speaks of “fellowship” amongst Christians on the basis of “our “common participation (*koinonia pneumatos*) of the Spirit” (Phil 2:2, 5), which provides the bond of mutual understanding and sympathy, which for Paul is the very basis of Christianity.

We are called to be of one mind, support each other and to maintain a humble attitude (1 Peter 3:8). Humility is not a form of low self-esteem, but rather a mind that thinks not of itself, but of others, which comes from being submissive to the will of God. We are to humble ourselves “under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt” us in due time (1Pet 5:6).

“Let us think of ways to motivate one another to acts of love and good works. And let us not neglect our meeting together, as some people do, but encourage one another, especially now that the day of His return is drawing near” (Hebrews 10:24).