

# **“Thank God for Love”**

A Sermon on Paul's Prayer in Philemon

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First Presbyterian Church Kingwood

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A group of young children were once asked a question, "What's love?" Here are some of their answers.

Cindy, who was 8, said, "During my piano recital, I was on a stage, and I was scared. I looked out at all the people watching me, and I saw my Dad waving and smiling. He was the only one doing that. And I wasn't scared anymore."

Nikki, who was 6, said "If you want to learn to love better, you should start with someone you don't like."

And Billy, who was only 4, said, "When someone loves you, the way they say your name is different. It just sounds good in their mouth."

Jesus said, "unless you turn and become like little children, you cannot enter the kingdom of heaven." And when you read or hear statements like those of Billy and Nikki and Cindy, I think you can understand why. But I hope you'll remember what they said this morning as we think about the letter Paul wrote to Philemon because Philemon is a letter that's all about love.

So let's start talking about Philemon by remembering what Billy said. Billy said "When someone loves you, the way they say your name is different. It just sounds good in their mouth."

Now listen to the opening words of Philemon, "Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus and Timothy our brother; to Philemon, our dear friend and fellow worker." Did you hear it? Did you hear how the name of Philemon sounds in Paul's mouth? And though he couldn't hear Paul speak it, when he heard his name in the opening sentence of this letter, I'm sure Philemon must have felt a lot like Billy. Because his name just sounds good in Paul's mouth.

It sounded good to Philemon to hear Paul call him my "dear friend." And in the Greek that Paul's letter was originally written in, what Paul says is even better

because he calls Philemon "toe agapehtoe." It means literally , "a man I truly love." And the rest of the letter is going to show us what those words mean, what it meant to Paul to say them, and what Paul hoped Philemon would understand when he read them.

But we're getting ahead of ourselves. Because we're still listening to the way Philemon's name sounds as Paul writes it. And when Paul writes Philemon, he calls him not only "a man I truly love," but a "fellow worker."

Naming someone a "fellow worker" is an honor Paul reserves for only a few. And the name signifies somebody who's as passionate about the church as Paul is. But Philemon's one of the few. He's someone who cares enough about the church to be willing to make sacrifices for it, sacrifices of time, of energy, of hospitality and of money. And like Paul's other "fellow workers" Philemon's willing to make the sacrifices because he wants to see the church grow.

Right now, of course, we're in the final days of our fall stewardship campaign. And I want to thank all of you who've made sacrifices in order to raise your giving to this church in our campaign so far. And I'd like to encourage all of you who haven't done so to make your gift this week. You can do so either by going on our church website or by filling out a stewardship pledge card.

But most of all I want to tell you if Philemon were here with us this morning I believe he'd encourage you to give too. He'd encourage you to make the sacrifice you need to keep watching this church grow. That's just the kind of person he was. That's why his name sounds good in Paul's mouth.

But there's another name in this letter that sounds good in Paul's mouth. And we find it not in verse 1, but in verse 10. The name is Onesimus. And the name sounds good because Paul calls him "my son."

Of course, Paul doesn't use the word "son" in any biological sense. He uses it in a spiritual sense. He says that Onesimus became his "son" while he was in chains. And the words signify that Onesimus was "born again" as Paul, a prisoner for his faith in a Roman jail, shared the gospel with him.

But I'm sure, for Onesimus, being loved as Paul' "son"was something like Cindy's experience being loved as a daughter. Remember Cindy? She was one of the children who was asked what love was. Here's what she said. "During my piano recital, I was on a stage, and I was scared. I looked out at all the

people watching me, and I saw my Dad waving and smiling. He was the only one doing that. And I wasn't scared anymore."

You see, there's something else you need to know about Onesimus. He was scared. Not of being on stage but of being spotted. You see Onesimus was an outlaw. He was a runaway slave and everyone he met on the street was potentially the person, who might identify him, and turn him over to the authorities.

Then the fugitive heard about the prisoner; the prisoner who talked about forgiveness. The word on the street was the prisoner said you could find forgiveness from God for your offense whatever it was. And that message acted like a magnet for Onesimus. It drew him to Paul. And somehow he arranged to meet him. And somewhere in that meeting Paul introduced Onesimus to Christ.

And now Paul, in this letter Paul is cheering for Onesimus, calling him "my son" as he introduces him to Philemon his "fellow worker." But it wasn't the first time Philemon had been introduced to Onesimus. And I wonder what kind of emotions ran through Philemon as he read Paul's words? Because Onesimus wasn't just any runaway slave. He was Philemon's runaway slave.

Which brings me back to six year old Nikki. Someone asked her what love meant once and she said. "If you want to learn to love better, you should start with someone you don't like."

Kent Hughes is a pastor and an author. And in one of his books he tells a story that show just how true Nikki's definition of love really is. Listen to the story.

"Several years ago," Kent writes, "one of my wife's friends Cathy came home for a year after spending six tough years living abroad, trying to bring the gospel to a group of people who had never heard it. She had been looking forward to coming home. The mission agency who'd sent her abroad had promised to rent her a townhouse with a patio.

And they did. She loved it. But a few weeks after she moved in, new neighbors moved in next door. The word to describe them would be "coarse." They played their music loud and the lyrics were laced with obscenities. They shouted the same obscenities at each other in the house and on the patio. They urinated in the yard. They made Cathy's life new home and her new life miserable.

The real crisis though came one day when Cathy returned home from the grocery store and discovered that her neighbors' children had sprayed orange paint all over her patio; the walls, the floor, everything! Cathy was distraught and then she was furious. She tried to pray her way past her feelings, but instead found herself saying out loud, "I can't love these people Lord. I hate them!"

Then a Scripture came to mind: "And beyond all these things put on love." In her heart she questioned, "Lord, how can I do that?" And all of a sudden a picture popped into her mind. The picture was of Jesus' clothes, the clothes that were taken away from him at the cross. The clothes were being divided by the soldiers, and a piece of Jesus' clothing was being offered to her. She put it on. Then the daydream stopped. And she decided to turn it into more than a daydream. She decided to wrap herself in the love, the sacrificial love of Christ.

She made a list of things to do. Then she did them. She baked cookies for her neighbors. She offered to baby-sit for free. She invited the mother over for coffee. And things changed, not everything, not all at once. But things changed.

A few weeks later the neighbors decided to move. They couldn't afford the townhouse any more. So they packed up their stuff. And within a week they were gone. But on the day they left, Cathy found herself standing in her front door watching them go and praying for them, praying God would lead them to another place where someone who knew Christ could keep on loving them.

And I believe Cathy's heart was in very much the same place as she prayed that prayer as Paul's heart was when he sent Onesimus back to Philemon. "I'm sending someone," Paul wrote, "who's now in my heart. I'm sending my very heart to you Philemon." And then Paul wrote, "Perhaps the reason he left you for a little while was so that you might have him back forever, no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother. He is very dear to me but even dearer to you, both as a fellow man and as a brother in the Lord."

So with all that as background let me ask you the question this morning, the same question the children were asked. What is love? What does the word really mean?

Well if it's the truest kind of love, like the love that Paul has for Philemon and Onesimus then it makes even a person's name sound good in your mouth; if it's

real love, then it's like the love Paul asked Onesimus to demonstrate in going back to Philemon, like the love that Paul asked Philemon to demonstrate in receiving Onesimus back into his household not as a slave but as a brother in the Lord. If that's the kind of love we're talking about, then we need to understand. Love isn't an emotion. Love is a decision. It's a decision we make to let Christ enable us to love someone else the same way he loved us, sacrificially.

And if we make that decision, we can count on it. We can put our faith in it. Things will change. Not everything; not all at once, but things will change.

If you do what Paul asked Onesimus to do in love; if you go back to a person you've wronged and ask to be received back into their life, things will change. If you do what Paul asked Philemon to do in love; if you receive someone back, someone who's run away from you and done you wrong, if you let them back into your life again, things will change. Not everything, not all at once, but things will change.

"I always thank my God," Paul prays ... "I remember you Philemon in my prayers, because I hear about your love for all God's people." That's Paul's prayer of thanksgiving for Philemon. Tell me, would he pray it for you this morning? Would it pray for me?

I hope so. I hope that we're full of the same kind of self-sacrificing love that Paul hoped Onesimus would have and Philemon would have. Because that kind of love makes a difference. Let's pray ...