

Faith and Love Among Believers

Philemon 1:4-7

Philemon 1:4-7: *"I thank my God, making mention of you always in my prayers,⁵ hearing of your love and faith which you have toward the Lord Jesus and toward all the saints,⁶ that the sharing of your faith may become effective by the acknowledgment of every good thing which is in you in Christ Jesus.⁷ For we have great joy and consolation in your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed by you, brother."*

Background Notes

The "section of thanksgiving" in verses 4-7 followed the salutation and greeting (v1-3). Typical 1st century letters had a section of thanksgiving after the greeting, and Paul's letter to Philemon is no exception. In this section of thanksgiving, the apostle Paul thanked the Lord for Philemon. Paul was particularly thankful for Philemon's faith and love that was expressed toward the saints at Colosse. Remember, the church in Colosse met in Philemon's home (v2). Most likely the church in Colosse was started during Paul's third missionary journey.

In Acts 19, when Paul came to Ephesus on his third missionary journey, he taught a daily Bible class in the School of Tyrannus. Acts 19:10: *"this continued for two years, so that all who dwelt in Asia heard the word of the Lord Jesus, both Jews and Greeks."* The "Asia" mentioned here is not the same as the continent of Asia today. In the Roman Empire of the 1st century, the *province* of Asia was located in present-day Turkey.

Colosse was about 100 miles to the east of Ephesus. The church at Colosse was probably founded during the time when Paul was teaching in the Bible school in Ephesus. Perhaps Philemon and Epaphras, another Christian from Colosse, heard Paul preach when they were in Ephesus for business purposes. They trusted in Jesus, returned to Colosse, and started the church that met in Philemon's home.

Paul was under house arrest in Rome when he wrote this letter to Philemon. He wrote to Philemon on behalf of Onesimus, Philemon's runaway slave. Onesimus had become a Christian through the ministry of the apostle Paul, and Paul was now sending him back to his master with this letter.

Paul wrote that he had heard of Philemon's love and faith toward the Lord Jesus and toward all the saints (v5). How did Paul hear this? Probably through Epaphras, who had come to Rome to visit Paul (Colossians 1:7 and Philemon v23). And perhaps he also heard about Philemon's exemplary life from Onesimus. Even in his pre-conversion days, Onesimus would certainly have observed Philemon's character and lifestyle, and this may even have been a significant factor in his conversion.

This is a great lesson for us. Unbelievers are taking notice of our character and lifestyle - and this could become a major factor in their conversion.

Doctrinal Points

1. Christians should thank the Lord for the love and faith of fellow believers.

Verses 4-5: *"I thank my God, making mention of you always in my prayers, hearing of your love and faith which you have toward the Lord Jesus and toward all the saints."* Paul reminded Philemon that he was praying for him, and thanking the Lord for him. Notice - Paul did not say that he prayed for Philemon once or twice, but that he *always* prayed for him.

Paul had a busy prayer life, didn't he? We might mention Philemon a few times in our prayers, but most of the time we pray about our own needs, don't we? We might especially have personal prayer requests if we were under house arrest, chained to a Roman guard, and facing trial in Rome, as Paul was at this time. But Paul was more concerned about others – and we should be as well. Paul thanked the Lord for Philemon's love and faith: first towards the Lord Jesus, and then towards all the saints.

Love and faith for the saints should always be the result of love and faith for the Lord Jesus. If you say you love the Lord Jesus and you have faith in Him, then you should automatically show love and have faith toward all believers. After all, they are the body of Christ. You can't love the Lord as the Head without caring for His body!

What does it mean to "show love and faith for the saints"? We certainly understand the "love" part, but what about the "faith" part? Faith toward all the saints means to trust other believers - to put our confidence in other Christians. Even though some saints will prove to be undependable and irresponsible, not all will be. And many times we must step out in faith in regard to our fellow believers.

Sometimes it's harder to show faith toward your fellow believers than it is to show love. It's true that fellow believers should prove themselves to be trustworthy, but there comes a point where you must take that step of faith in your fellow believers. There are times when we need to give them the benefit of the doubt.

Just as other believers have put their faith in me, I too need to put my faith in other believers. Some years ago, because I was moving, I turned over the leadership of a youth ministry to another believer. This believer had proved himself in various ways, but I still had to trust him and have faith in him as I turned over the ministry and the young people to his care. And he proved to be faithful!

Is it possible that there is a ministry or fellowship that you're involved in right now, and it is suffering because you refuse to let go – you refuse to share (or even turn over) your place in the leadership? Have you refused to have faith in your fellow believers?

In this passage, Paul may have been hinting that Philemon should be willing to show faith in Onesimus. Onesimus, the runaway slave, was returning to his master, Philemon - now as a new believer in Christ. Paul thanked the Lord for the love and faith Philemon had shown to *all* the saints -and would now show to Onesimus as well.

The primary teaching point here is that Christians should thank the Lord for the love and faith of fellow believers.

2. Christians should pray to the Lord for the love and faith of fellow believers.

Verses 6-7: *“That the sharing of your faith may become effective by the acknowledgment of every good thing which is in you in Christ Jesus. For we have great joy and consolation in your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed by you, brother.”*

Paul not only thanked the Lord for Philemon’s faith and love, but he also prayed that it would grow. Paul was confident that Philemon would grow in his understanding of every good thing that was in him through his relationship with Christ. And Paul was confident that Philemon’s love and faith for all the saints (including Onesimus) would grow as well.

This is still true today. The more we come to understand all the wonderful blessings that are ours in Christ, the more our increased love for the Lord will ripple out to fellow believers. And that includes those Christians who may have wronged us, or those who are not easy to love.

Do you know any fellow believers like that? I’m sure you do. I’m praying that your faith and love for all believers will grow! And I need you to pray this for me, because I certainly need to show more love and faith toward my fellow believers. Christians should pray to the Lord for the love and faith of fellow believers.

In verse 7 we sense that Paul was confident that Philemon’s love for the saints would indeed continue to grow, including his love for Onesimus. That was Paul’s prayer for Philemon. Do we pray for fellow believers this way - or do we just pray for fellow believers when they’re sick or out of a job? Christians should pray to the Lord for the love and faith of fellow believers.

Practical Applications

1. Do we love all the saints?

In verse 5 Paul commended Philemon for his love for all the saints: *“Hearing of your love and faith which you have toward the Lord Jesus and toward all the saints.”* Do we love all the saints - even the saints who are hard to love? We might think it was easy for Philemon to love all the saints. After all, this was early Church times, when everyone was spiritual and on fire for the Lord! Right? No! Not so! Read Paul’s 1 Corinthians. Some of the Christians in the church at Corinth had all kinds of problems. The early churches were much more of a cross-section of society than our typical suburban

churches today. There were rich and poor, slave and free, Jew and Gentile - many financial and cultural differences. It certainly was not easy to love all the saints - and yet the apostle said that Philemon showed love to ***all the saints!***

Do we show love to all the saints? What about the saints that we don't naturally like? What about those saints who have bad manners at church suppers? What about those saints who sing off key? What about those saints that "don't see it our way" about church traditions, church music, or mode of services? What about those saints who are loudly outspoken, or the ones who always seem to rub us the wrong way?

Can we follow the biblical role model of Philemon? Think about it. Do we love all the saints?

2. Are you a "refresher" or a "refresh-ee"?

In verse 7 Paul told Philemon that "*the hearts of the saints have been refreshed by you, brother.*" Could that be said of you? Have you refreshed the hearts of the saints? If so, praise the Lord! You are a "refresher," and we badly need more refreshers! We need more Christians who can encourage and lift the spirits of fellow believers. We need more refreshers, because there are many needy "refresh-ees" around.

What is a "refresh-ee"? The word is not in the dictionary, but I think you can guess. A "refresh-ee" is a person who is on the receiving end of refreshment - the one who is being refreshed. Just as we have employers and employees, we also have refreshers and refresh-ees. Which are you?

We all need to be cheered and refreshed at times - but some Christians never reach out to refresh others. Those are the Christians that I'm calling "refresh-ees" here. We have too many "refresh-ees" in the church. "Refresh-ees" take and take - but they don't give back. "Refresh-ees" are those people who are always down in the dumps. Their spirits always need to be lifted. Do you know any fellow believers like that? "Refresh-ees" are a heavy weight on the body of Christ.

How much better it is to be a refresher, like Philemon! About Philemon, the apostle Paul could say, "*I have derived much joy and comfort from your love, my brother, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you.*" How encouraging to receive such a commendation from the apostle Paul! And even more wonderful to be able to look forward to hearing "Well done!" from the Lord Jesus, because you have cheered and lifted and refreshed the hearts of His people!

Are you a "refresher" or a "refresh-ee"?