

How to be a Real Friend A Study of Philemon 1-7

Characteristic of Completeness: Kindness

Big Idea: Offer encouragement.

Related Scriptures: Romans 1:8; Philippians 1:3-6; Colossians 1:3-6;
1 Thessalonians 1:2-3; 3:9; 5:11; Hebrews 3:13

Introduction:

1. Have you noticed that it's getting harder and harder to be a friend these days? We are so busy, our schedules are so crammed with tasks that there seems to be less and less time to invest in friendships. Increasingly, we Americans are a people disconnected and socially isolated.

Harvard professor Robert Putnam confirms what many of us feel. In his heavily researched ► book, titled *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, Putnam concludes: "Americans today spend dramatically less time connecting with family, friends and the broader community than we did a generation ago . . . We eat and socialize less frequently with friends."¹

2. ► What a great loss! I talk with more and more people who are isolated and lonely, and the reality of it really hits home in times of personal crisis. When your marriage has crumbled, or you're facing bankruptcy, or you've lost a loved one, or you've lost your job, or you're ill or depressed, it's particularly tough when there seems to be no true friends around to share the burden.
3. And, the problem is not just personal. It's bigger than that. It affects our entire society. Let me read you a short excerpt from an article that appeared in ► *The Arizona Republic*, titled "Unraveling America." It says,

Researchers have long credited voluntary associations and local groups [that is, communities of friends] . . . with planting and nurturing the basic values of a democratic society. These values, this network of contacts, this habit of belonging creates what scholars call ► social capital—the essential currency of a functioning community. . . .

And unlike financial capital, social capital grows with use: The more you use it, the more you have.

Today, however, most Americans seem too busy, cynical or apathetic. And Arizonans face a special challenge because of the state's transience, immigration and ethnic diversity. . . . the facts seem clear: We'd rather watch

¹ Quoted by Richard de Uriarte, "Unraveling America," *The Arizona Republic*, March 4, 2001.

*Friends on television than make them in real life.*²

4. ► Professor Putnam points to a lack of social capital—or simply put, a lack of meaningful friendships—as an underlying cause of all sorts of social problems, including ► homicide, suicide, teenage pregnancy, dropping out of school, and depression.
5. But, the research is not entirely discouraging. The professor from Harvard points to a source of hope for the declining social capital. He ► says, “Faith communities in which people worship together are arguably the single most important repositories of social capital in America.”³

That’s a modern version of an ancient truth: There is hope in the church. You are sitting in what God designed to be the best place to forge friendships: the church.

Some of you may be thinking, “Well if that is so, why am I sitting here in a church still feeling a little isolated? Why am I having a hard time connecting? Why am I still lonely?”

Perhaps we need to learn or be reminded of ► how to be a real friend. Perhaps we’ve become so disconnected that we’ve forgotten or never learned about some of the elements of friendship.

6. This morning I want to turn to the Bible to begin a series of studies to learn about God’s perspective on how to be a real friend. For five weeks we’ll be working our way through the little Bible letter of ► Philemon.

Some of you may be wondering why I’m abandoning preaching through the gospel of Matthew. Well, we are in the midst of a transition in our youth ministry—a transition in which all the elders are filling some holes, and I’m now leading high school small groups on Wednesday nights. I worked through Philemon some seven years ago, and so, not having to prepare sermons from scratch frees me to devote more time to the youth ministry right now.

Besides, I think the message of Philemon will be particularly easy and timely to apply. I’m excited because the things we’ll be learning together can be broadly and immediately applied in many different relationships. They apply not just to friends, but also to family—husbands, wives, children, parents, brothers, and sisters.

So, let’s find out a little bit more about this letter called Philemon. The first three verses give a good deal of background information. Let’s ► read them:

^{NIV} Philemon 1 Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, To

² Uriate.

³ Quoted by Uriate.

Philemon our dear friend and fellow worker, 2 to Apphia our sister, to Archippus our fellow soldier and to the church that meets in your home: 3 Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

- a. The writer of the letter is the apostle ► Paul. He mentions Timothy as also being with him, but Paul is clearly the one doing the writing. Later in the letter, Paul repeatedly uses the personal pronoun “I”, indicating he’s the writer.
- b. The recipient is a man named ► Philemon. The letter bears his name in our Bibles. Two other people are mentioned out of courtesy: Apphia and Archippus. But, Philemon is who Paul has in mind. Philemon is listed first. He is named as Paul’s ► “dear friend.” And, when Paul says, “your home” in Verse 3, “your” is singular, indicating Paul is writing to Philemon.

We cannot be sure, but some Bible scholars have speculated that Apphia was Philemon’s wife and Archippus was Philemon’s son.

- c. This letter to Philemon is the shortest letter penned by Paul in the Bible. There is only one chapter, which explains why, when references are made to Philemon, no chapters are cited, just verses. It’s because there’s only one chapter. In Greek, the original language in which it was written, there are only 335 words in the letter. And, it is the most private, personal, friend-to-friend correspondence we have from Paul. One commentator says of Philemon, “It is the nearest approach to a purely private letter in the Pauline correspondence . . . its freshness and naturalness are impressive.”⁴

So, in reading Philemon, it’s almost as though we’re reading someone else’s mail. The language is not that of a scholar making a doctrinal case; it’s that of a real friend speaking informally and warmly.

- d. It’s not surprising that Paul does not open this letter as he customarily does by identifying himself as an apostle because he’s not asserting his spiritual authority; he’s appealing to a dear friend. Instead of identifying himself as an apostle, Paul says he’s a ► “prisoner of Christ.” This and other clues in the Bible indicate that Paul was probably writing from prison in ► Rome around 60 AD. Moreover, evidence suggests that Paul used his friends ► Onesimus and Tychichus as couriers to take this letter to his dear friend Philemon who lived in Colossae.
- e. The occasion or purpose of the letter centers on the relationship between three men: ► Paul, Philemon, and Onesimus.

⁴ D.A. Carson, Douglas J. Moo, and Leon Morris, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1992) 387.

- (1) ► Philemon was a man of considerable influence and social standing. A church in Colossae met at his home, so his home was probably sizable. He had slaves or servants, so he was probably a man with resources. And we will learn in the weeks to come that Paul led Philemon to Christ. At some point, Paul had shared with Philemon the good news that Jesus Christ, the Son of God died and rose again to be his Savior from sin. In response, Philemon trusted Christ as his Savior, and it changed his life. He became a devoted follower of Jesus because Paul calls Philemon a “fellow worker.”
- (2) As for ► Onesimus, he was a slave owned by Philemon. Slavery was common in that day. There were millions of slaves in the Roman Empire. Onesimus ran away from Philemon, his master, and it seems that Onesimus owes Philemon some money, either because he robbed Philemon before he fled, or simply because his services were lost to Philemon when he ran.
- (3) In his flight, Onesimus somehow met Paul. Paul shared with Onesimus the good news that Jesus Christ died and rose again to be his Savior from sin, and Onesimus believed in Christ as his Savior.
- (4) Onesimus apparently confessed to Paul that he was a runaway slave. Roman law required that Onesimus return to his master. So, Paul sends Onesimus back to Philemon with a letter, explaining the whole situation of Onesimus coming to Christ and appealing to Philemon to treat Onesimus well.
- f. ► We’re going to find out about friendship by studying the relationship between these three guys. This morning we’re going to confine our study to the relationship between ► Paul and Philemon as represented in Verses 4-7.
- g. Right up front I want to tell you what the ► big idea of this message is. It’s not revolutionary; but it’s very important. It’s not complicated; but it’s sorely needed and most of us don’t do it very well. I know I don’t. The big idea is to ► offer encouragement. That’s it. Offer encouragement. One of the primary aspects of being a real friend is to encourage one another.

Considering the thirty-one Characteristics of Completeness listed on the back of your sermon notes, I’m putting this under that category of ► kindness. Kindness is our Characteristic of Completeness for the week.

The kindness of encouraging others is not optional. The Bible commands it of believers. ► 1 Thessalonians 5:11 says,

^{NIV} 1 Thessalonians 5:11 . . . encourage one another and build each

other up . . .

► Hebrews 3:13 says it again,

^{NIV} Hebrews 3:13 . . . encourage one another daily, as long as it is called Today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness.

In the absence of encouragement, we can all become hardened. So we need to offer encouragement.

- h. ► Sounds simple enough, but the question is, how do we do it? How do we encourage one another? I don't know about you, but sometimes it's hard for me to get a handle on abstract, relational concepts like encouragement.

There have been times when Cathy has said to me, "Bob, you are no encouragement to me" or "Bob, it would be good to encourage so-and-so." Sometimes I blankly respond, "What?" I can be a relational dolt. If you're like me you could use some guidelines. Encouragement does not come naturally.

- i. In encouraging other people, we need to ► tell them some things. In the letter of Philemon, Paul gives us an example of three things we can tell friends that will encourage them deeply. There are three things that we can do to energize and build up people in an extraordinary way.

- I. ► The first thing you can do to encourage your friends is to tell them how and why you are ► thanking God for them. You can let them know you're thanking God for them, and explain *how* and *why* you're doing it. Let's look at how Paul does that.

- A. In Verse 4, Paul tells Philemon ► how he is thanking God for him. He ► says,

^{NIV} Philemon 4 I always thank my God as I remember you in my prayers

This is the "how" part. Paul is saying that, when he prays for Philemon, he's always thankful for him, and he expresses his gratefulness to God.

Think about how it would make you feel if a friend of yours said, "I'm thanking God for you!" As long as you thought the friend was being genuine, this would be encouraging wouldn't it? Wouldn't it build you up to think that someone is not only praying for you, but also that someone is thanking God for you? Yes, of course.

Unfortunately, I suspect this kind of thing happens so rarely that, if and when it does, those of us who are a little more cynical may think, "Okay, what do you want? What's the real reason you're shmoozing me? Why are you buttering me up?"

B. I'm so glad that Paul goes on to explain ► why he's thanking God in Verse 5. He provides a couple of specific reasons for thanking God. He points out some good things about Philemon that prompt his thankfulness. In explaining *why* he's thanking God, the effectiveness of Paul's encouragement is multiplied and its authenticity is confirmed.

1. In ► Verse 5, Paul says, "I'm thanking God for you . . ."

^{NIV} Philemon 5a because I hear about your faith in the Lord Jesus . . .

Paul has heard good things about Philemon's ► faith in Jesus. He has received good reports about how people can see Philemon's faith, and he's telling Philemon what he's heard.

2. In the second part of Verse 5, Paul mentions another reason why he's thanking God. He says, ► "I'm thanking God because I hear of your faith . . ."

^{NIV} Philemon 5b . . . and your love for all the saints.

The word for ► love here is a translation of the Greek word, *agape*. You may know that this kind of love is not so much an emotion as it is a decision to sacrificially serve another person.

And, the word "saints" here does not refer only to venerable people of history commemorated with statues. "Saints" is a biblical term used to describe believers in general. From a biblical perspective, all people who have trusted Christ as their Savior are saints.

So, Paul has heard about Philemon's acts of loving service to other believers and he reflects those comments back to Philemon, saying that's why he's thanking God for him. That's encouragement.

C. ► How do we apply this? What would it look like to tell a friend how and why you're thanking God for them today? Let me give some examples:

1. First of all, whenever you hear something good about another person, try to recognize it as a great opportunity to encourage that person. It's because the good things you hear give you the "why" part of the equation for telling that friend you're thanking God for them. Let me give you a real-life example:

a. Felipe is a physician, a husband, and a father. He's also involved in our ESL program at Moon Valley. In the ESL program, we teach Spanish speakers how to speak English. Then we offer an optional

Bible study. Felipe leads the Bible study in Spanish every Tuesday night. He's teaching through the Gospel of John.

Within the past couple of weeks, Pastor Gina Orr told me that Felipe is doing a phenomenal job. His teaching is clear and engaging, and the students are glued. So, I could write a note to Felipe and say something like this:

Felipe: I'm thanking God for you, my friend and brother, because I'm hearing that you're doing a phenomenal job with the ESL Bible study. The students are eating it up, and that is music to my ears. I know you're a busy man. I'm thrilled that one physician is taking the time to introduce others to the Great Physician.

It can be that simple. Offer encouragement.

- b. Dave is another example. Dave recently went to Mississippi with a group of our men to help reconstruct some homes. I heard a report just last week that Dave was an encourager on the group. So, I could write Dave a note and say something like this:

Hey, Dave. I'm thanking God for the rumors I keep hearing about you—rumors that you were the encourager on the Mississippi trip. That you had the boldness to offer hugs and words of encouragement to men with hammers. I can see it, and it brings a smile to my face. Go Dave.

That's all there is to it. Offer encouragement.

- 2. Now, even if you haven't heard something good about another person, you can simply observe the good things yourself and encourage them. You can do this.
- II. ► A second big thing you can do to encourage a friend is to tell them how and why ► you are praying for them. This is a little different than thanking God for them. It's interceding for them. It's praying specifically to God on their behalf. It's asking God to help them in specific ways.
- A. It's the same how-and-why pattern. First, Paul tells Philemon ► how he's praying for Philemon. He does that in the first part of ► Verse 6, when he says,

^{NIV} Philemon 6a I pray that you may be active in sharing your faith, . . .

Paul is praying about a specific way that Philemon can ► follow Jesus. He's praying that Philemon will follow Jesus by sharing his faith.

- B. Then, Paul tells Philemon ► why he's praying for him in the last part of Verse 6. He ► says it's,

^{NIV} Philemon 6b . . . so that you will have a full understanding of every good thing we have in Christ.

Paul is praying that Philemon will be ► fulfilled as he follows Jesus. In this case, he's praying that in following Jesus, Philemon will be fulfilled in knowing and experiencing more and more all the good things God has given us in Christ.

- C. ► How can we follow Paul's lead here? Let me give you some examples:

1. My friend, Terry, is coming out of a very difficult time, and he's facing some important decisions. So, I could drop Terry a note and say something like this:

Dear Terry: It blesses me to see you clinging to your faith in the midst of a dry and bewildering season. I pray that God will bring you rest and refreshment, that He will heal your wounds, and that He will give you an extraordinary sense of His presence and direction.

There you go. Easy. Offer encouragement.

2. Or here's another example. Through the prayer chain, I heard that Katie is sick. So, I could drop Katie a note and say something like this:

Katie: I heard you've got mono, and that you had to drop out of softball. That's a bummer. I'm sorry you're having to go through this, but I'm praying that God will bring healing and strength and comfort to you.

That's it. Takes maybe five minutes. Offer encouragement.

- III. ► A third big thing you can do to encourage a friend is to tell them how and why you are ► touched by them. Tell them how and why they make you feel good. Tell them about the positive emotions they bring out in you.

- A. Listen to Paul tell ► how Philemon makes him feel. He says in the first part of ► Verse 7:

^{NIV} Philemon 7a Your love has given me great joy and encouragement . . .

Paul is expressing his ► emotions. He's telling Philemon how he feels about him.

- B. Then Paul explains ► why he experiences these emotions. He explains in the last part of ► Verse 7,

^{NIV} Philemon 7b . . . because you, brother, have refreshed the hearts of the saints.

Here, Paul is linking his own feelings to the positive ► impact Philemon is having on other people.

- C. ► How can we follow Paul's example here?

Some of you may be thinking, "This doesn't really apply to me because I'm just not the type of person to express my emotions. Paul must have been one of those touchy-feely types—you know, one of those sappy, sentimental, teddy-bear types. That's just not me."

If this is what you're thinking, I'm sorry, but your logic has some holes in it. Paul was not a touchy-feely guy. He was no wuss. Paul was a courageous activist who tackled issues head on. Listen to what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 4:18-21. See if this sounds like it comes from an emotional milquetoast:

^{NIV} 1 Corinthians 4:18 Some of you have become arrogant, as if I were not coming to you. 19 But I will come to you very soon . . . 21 What do you prefer? Shall I come to you with a whip, or in love and with a gentle spirit?

That doesn't sound like a teddy bear. Maybe a bear, but not a teddy bear. I don't think Paul was the touchy-feely type. He was steely and driven and analytical. Nevertheless, Paul took pains to express his emotions in an encouraging way when appropriate. We should, too.

How can we do that? Let me give you some examples:

1. Here's a note I could write to my twenty-five-year-old son.

Hey Chase: Thanks for your advice the other day. I'm new at this asking-advice-from-my-son deal. But it makes me feel safe and secure, knowing that I've got your wisdom and you've got my back. I'm proud of you.

See. Not that hard. Offer encouragement.

2. Or, here's a note I could write to my friend Dottie.

Dear Dottie: I see you every week, setting up on Sunday, stocking drinks in the kitchen, volunteering in the office, coordinating prayer

requests. It makes me feel so honored and hopeful for what God has in store for us. It makes me want to keep going. Thank you.

There you go. Write it up and send it. Done. Offer encouragement.

Conclusion:

This ► is my challenge to you. Think of someone who needs your encouragement this week. Then, sit down with ► your sermon outline as a guide and write a short note of encouragement to that person. How and why you are thanking God for them. And/or how and why you are praying for them. And/or how and why you are touched by them.

Send it this week. It doesn't have to be a lengthy masterpiece, just a brief note from a friend. ► This is Paul's entire note of encouragement up on the screen. It's not long. In English, it's three sentences for a total of 75 words. And I've given you six example notes in my sermon today. Average word count: 48. Three or four sentences, boom, you're done. You can do something like that. Offer encouragement.

► Please take a moment right now, as I pray, to think of that person who needs your encouragement. Let's pray.

Lord, please bring to our minds the person you'd like us to encourage. Who is it? Let us know in this moment.

And, Lord, please give us the words to write and the discipline to write them this week. Amen.

After you've completed your assignment for this week, then it's up to you to make it a habit. Offer encouragement.