

How To Be A Real Friend, *Part 2*

A Study of Philemon 8-14

Characteristic of Completeness: Gentleness

Big Idea: Offer respect.

Related Scriptures: Proverbs 11:1; 25:11; Matthew 11:29; 1 Corinthians 2:3; 2 Corinthians 1:8; 10:1; Ephesians 4:2; Philippians 2:3-8; Colossians 4:6; 1 Timothy 1:15; 1 Peter 3:8; 5:2-3

Introduction:

- A. Last week we began a series of messages titled, ► “How to be a Real Friend.” All of the messages come from a study of the little Bible letter of ► Philemon. Philemon is a great place to learn about friendship because it is a deeply personal letter from one dear friend to another. In reading it, 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.

- B. The author of the letter is the ► apostle Paul. Biblical evidence suggests that Paul is probably writing from prison in ► Rome around 60 AD, and that Paul sent his friends ► Onesimus and Tychichus as couriers to take this letter to his dear friend Philemon who lived in Colossae.

The occasion or purpose of the letter centers on the relationship between three men: ► Paul, Philemon, and Onesimus. Let me review a little bit about these guys.

- 1. ► Philemon was a man of considerable influence and social standing. Paul had led Philemon to belief in Christ. Philemon became a devoted follower of Jesus, and a church met in his home in Colossae.

- 2. As for ► Onesimus, he was a slave owned by Philemon. Slavery was common in that day. Onesimus had run away from Philemon, his master, and it seems that Onesimus owes Philemon some money.

In his flight, Onesimus somehow met Paul. And Paul led Onesimus to faith in Christ as well.

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.

- C. Last Sunday, the big idea was to offer encouragement. Today the ► big idea is to offer something else. The big idea is to ► offer respect. That’s it. Offer respect. One of the primary ways of being a real friend is to offer respect to one another.

To offer respect is to demonstrate high regard for another, to bestow honor, to show esteem, value, and care for another.

How do you offer respect? I believe Paul models it for us in writing to Philemon. Paul shows us seven different ways of offering respect in Verses 8-14. If you're like me, seven is too many to remember. So here's what I invite you to do. As I unpack each of the seven ways of offering respect, prayerfully consider which one the Lord may want you to work on right now, this week, maybe even today.

- I. ► Here's one of the seven ways of offering respect: Be ► gentle. To be gentle with another person is not to be a wimp. It is not to be weak. On the contrary it is strength under control. When a horse is characterized as gentle, it's not because horse is weak; a horse is gentle when its strength is under control. A horse is gentle when it is surrendered in service to its rider—in "holding above" its rider.

- A. Let's look at how Paul is gentle in Verses ► 8 and 9. Paul says,

^{NIV} Philemon 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. . . .

Paul is saying that he has the authority to order Philemon to do what he wants, but he's not going to assert his authority. Rather, he's going to respect Philemon by appealing to him out of love.

Of all the thirty-one Characteristics of Completeness in Christ listed on the back of your sermon notes, this sermon is perhaps most closely related to gentleness. And so, ► Gentleness is our Characteristic of Completeness for the week.

I think it is important to realize certain things about Paul in order to fully appreciate his gentleness here.

1. Paul's knowledge of scripture and biblical history was unparalleled. As a young man, he attended the Jewish school of learning at Jerusalem and became the pupil of the celebrated rabbi Gamaliel, spending many years in elaborate study of the Old Testament.
2. The resurrected Jesus Himself appeared to Paul on the road to Damascus, at which time, Paul became of follower of Jesus and an apostle.
3. Paul became a zealous missionary and church planter, traveling the ancient Mediterranean world, telling people about Jesus and starting churches. And he was inspired along the way to write more New Testament scripture than any other person. His writings include the deepest, most important theological arguments in the Bible. No other person was more influential or more important in the spread of Christianity than Paul.

4. And it's hard to imagine that anyone suffered more for the cause of Christ than Paul. He earned many purple hearts in spiritual warfare.¹
5. At the time Paul wrote Philemon, he was about 60 years old. He had probably been serving the Lord tirelessly for about 25 years. If the early church was a spiritual army, then Paul was its highest officer on earth. No one ranked higher. No one was more decorated. No human had greater spiritual authority than Paul.

But, in spite of all of Paul's spiritual authority and power with which he could have issued a command, he respected Philemon by gently appealing to him out of love. He could have come off like, "Hey, buddy, I got zits bigger than you." But instead he says, "I appeal to you on the basis of love."

- B. Gentleness is not just a good idea; it's required of every believer. ► Ephesians 4:2 says,

^{NIV} Ephesians 4:2 Be completely humble and ► gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love.

- To be a follower of Jesus is to want to be like Him, and Jesus is gentle. Jesus says in ► Matthew 11:29,

^{NIV} Matthew 11:29 Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am ► gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.

- The apostle Paul wanted to emulate Christ's gentleness. Paul says in ► 2 Corinthians 10:1,

^{NIV} 2 Corinthians 10:1 By the meekness and gentleness of Christ, I appeal to you—

To offer respect is to be gentle.

- C. ► Where does this show up in your life? Well, this is particularly appropriate when you find yourself in a position of power or authority. If you're a parent or a teacher or a husband or a boss or a leader or even an older sibling, you hold a position of some power or authority. Be gentle. Not incessantly bossy. Not always asserting your authority. Not continually throwing your weight around.

To be sure, there are times when exerting one's authority and demonstrating tough love are needful. But, gentleness should be the norm. Offer respect by being gentle.

¹ Consider, for example, 2 Corinthians 11:23-28.

II. ► Here's another way of offering respect: Be ► vulnerable. To be vulnerable is to show that you are subject to the same human frailties and failures as everybody else.

A. In the last part of ► Verse 9, Paul says,

^{NIV} Philemon 9 . . . I then, as Paul—an old man and now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus—

Paul is quite open about his own frailty and weakness. He's old and imprisoned and dependent on others to help him.

B. Paul's willingness to be vulnerable shows up repeatedly in the Bible.

In ► 1 Corinthians 2:3, Paul says,

^{NIV} 1 Corinthians 2:3 I came to you in weakness and fear, and with much trembling.

Paul is admitting that he was weak and afraid before the people of Corinth.

In ► 2 Corinthians 1:8, Paul says,

^{NIV} 2 Corinthians 1:8 We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about the hardships we suffered in the province of Asia. We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired even of life.

Paul is admitting that he felt so oppressed he wanted to end it all.

In ► 1 Timothy 1:15, Paul says,

^{NIV} 1 Timothy 1:15 Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners--of whom I am the worst.

That's vulnerable. Some may ask, "How is respect shown through vulnerability?" Well, to be vulnerable before a friend is to demonstrate that you trust them with who you really are. You trust them with how you really feel. It's honoring to people when you show that you have enough faith in them to be authentic. A way to respect a friend is to be vulnerable.

C. ► What does this look like in your life? It think men have a particularly tough time being vulnerable. It's viewed as a weakness in our culture. Work at disclosing to a friend your own frailties and failures. It doesn't have to be some lengthy, tell-all confessional. Just show that you're real. Show them you're human. Offer respect by being vulnerable.

III. ► Here's another way of offering respect: Be ► tactful. To be tactful is to say things in a skillfully considerate way. It is to say hard things in a way that is not needlessly offensive or provocative. Being tactful respects the feelings another person may have about what you're saying.

A. In ► Verse 10. Paul says,

^{NIV} Philemon 10 I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, who became my son while I was in chains.

You don't see how this is particularly tactful do you? You're wondering how in the world I tortured tactfulness out of this Verse. Well, it's not apparent in English, but it is when you read this in the original Greek. This is how ► Verse 10 would be translated if we were to adhere strictly to the Greek word order:

I appeal to you for my son, who became my son while I was in chains, Onesimus.

You see, in Greek, Onesimus is the very last word in the sentence. Why? Because that's Paul's way of being tactful. He knows that Philemon has been ripped off by his runaway slave, Onesimus. As such, Paul knows that Onesimus is probably a sore subject with Philemon. So, Paul wants to win Philemon's favor. He wants to communicate that Onesimus became his son in Christ—He wants to explain that Onesimus has trusted Christ before he ever mentions his name. That is tactful. It's saying a hard thing without being needlessly offensive.

B. ► The need for tact is explained elsewhere in Scripture.

For example, ► Colossians 4:6 says,

^{NIV} Colossians 4:6 Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone.

► Proverbs 25:11 says,

^{NIV} Proverbs 25:11 A word aptly spoken is like apples of gold in settings of silver.

C. ► Sometimes I think people consider tactfulness to be a kind of creative insincerity—something slippery, calculated to conceal, with hidden agendas.

That's not what Paul models. Paul doesn't shy away from serving up the truth, even if it's difficult to swallow. He does, however, serve it on a plate nicely, with parsley. Tactfulness is about presentation. Offer respect by being tactful.

IV. ► Here's another way of offering respect: Be ► sympathetic. To be sympathetic is to show that you have some understanding and appreciation for what someone else is going through. To be sympathetic is to put yourself in someone else's shoes and to demonstrate that you share the same feeling. You understand.

A. In ► Verse 11, Paul says,

^{NIV} Philemon 11 Formerly he was useless to you, but now he has become useful both to you and to me.

Paul is using a play on words here. The name Onesimus literally means "useful." It was a common name for slaves in that day because, indeed, they were useful to their masters. Paul is saying that "useful" had become useless to Philemon. He's acknowledging the loss Philemon experienced by virtue of Onesimus running away. He understands the cost to Philemon and how he must feel about it. That's sympathetic.

B. To be sympathetic is elsewhere commanded in the Bible. ► 1 Peter 3:8 says,

^{NIV} 1 Peter 3:8 Finally, all of you, live in harmony with one another; be sympathetic . . .

C. ► How can we be sympathetic? It's not a matter of being syrupy all the time. It's simply showing that you understand how another person feels. Many times my wife has come to me with a problem. My natural response is to fix it, to work out a solution. But many times what Cathy needs from me is not a solution, but sympathy. She wants me to offer her respect in listening sympathetically to her dilemma, in entering into the dilemma with her, and understanding what she's going through.

My failure to sympathize is disrespectful to my wife. It makes her feel like she's just another item on my to-do list: mow lawn, read mail, wash car, and fix Cathy's problem. I need to be sympathetic.

Offer respect by being sympathetic.

V. ► Here's another way of offering respect: Be ► honest.

A. In ► Verse 12, Paul says,

^{NIV} Philemon 12 I am sending him—who is my very heart—back to you.

Now, it seems to me that it would have been easy for Paul not to send Onesimus. It would have been easy for Paul to remain silent and keep Onesimus around. That would have been more expedient for Paul because Onesimus had become useful and close to him. Philemon was nearly 900 miles away as the crow flies; he would have

never known. But Paul is honest. He does the right thing, even when it's more difficult for him.

- B. ► Proverbs 11:1 says,

^{NIV} Proverbs 11:1 The LORD abhors dishonest scales, but accurate weights are his delight.

- C. ► Can you say that your friendships are characterized by absolute honesty, or is there a lot of superficial game-playing? Do you shoot straight, or do you leave friends wondering? Offer respect by being honest.

- VI. ► Here's another way of offering respect: Be ► open. This is closely related to being honest. It involves disclosing the desires or motivations behind your actions so that a friend knows exactly where you're coming from. It is the absence of hidden agendas.

- A. In ► Verse 13, Paul says,

^{NIV} Philemon 13 I would have liked to keep him with me so that he could take your place in helping me while I am in chains for the gospel.

Paul does not hide that fact that he would have liked Onesimus to remain as his helper. Figuratively speaking, Paul's friendship with Philemon does not consist of trying to sell him a basket of fruit by putting the best fruit on top and hiding the less desirable ones on the bottom. Paul is transparent. He's authentic. He's open.

- B. In 2 Corinthians, Paul speaks of this kind of openness and sincerity. He says, beginning in ► 2 Corinthians 2:17,

^{NIV} 2 Corinthians 2:17 . . . in Christ we speak before God with sincerity, like men sent from God. . . . 4:2 . . . we have renounced secret and shameful ways; we do not use deception . . . On the contrary, by setting forth the truth plainly we commend ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God.

Being open is a way of offering respect and honoring God.

- C. ► Now, by being open, I'm not suggesting that you bear your soul to everybody. I'm not suggesting that you blurt out every thought that comes to your mind. Some discretion is in order. I am suggesting that we be authentic and transparent so that friends don't have to try to guess what we're really after. Offer respect by being open.

- VII. ► Here's a final way of offering respect: ► Be deferential. To be deferential is to defer to or to yield to the wishes of another. It's a general openness to do what they want to do, go where they want to go. Of course, there are moral boundaries to this general idea. It's not about following

a friend in doing wrong. It's not about being co-dependent. It's about being unselfish.

A. In ► Verse 14, Paul says,

^{NIV} Philemon 14 But I did not want to do anything without your consent, so that any favor you do will be spontaneous and not forced.

Paul is deferring to Philemon. He is saying, "What you do with Onesimus is your call. I don't want to presume anything. If you want to return Onesimus to help me, that's entirely up to you." That's being deferential. That's a way of offering respect.

In our cynical culture, we may look at this whole passage and say, "Paul is just trying to manipulate Philemon. Paul is just schmoozing. He's maneuvering to get what he wants."

But this thinking does not square with the circumstances. Paul holds all the cards here. He doesn't have to manipulate to get what he wants. Paul already has Onesimus and he has the spiritual authority to keep him. He could have simply commanded Philemon as a general commands a sergeant. He could have even appealed to the letter of the Mosaic Law. In Deuteronomy 23:15, it says,

^{NIV} Deuteronomy 23:15 If a slave has taken refuge with you, do not hand him over to his master.

But Paul does not invoke the Law, he appeals to the heart in a deferential way.

B. This is not manipulation. This is being a good friend and shepherd. ► 1 Peter 5:2 tells leaders,

^{NIV} 1 Peter 5:2 Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, serving as overseers . . . 3 not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock.

Paul is not lording it over Philemon. He's offering respect by being deferential. In effect, he says, "You decide."

C. ► Now this can play out in a number of ways.

1. I've seen deference taken to a frustrating and silly extreme. You're out with a friend and you say, "Where would you like to go eat?"

And they say, "I don't care; you decide."

And you say, "No, no. You decide."

And they say, “I don’t care.”

And you say, “Okay then, how about Chili’s?”

And the silence speaks louder than words. They don’t want to go to Chili’s. And so you’re stuck. This is not deferential; it’s annoying.

2. And you can be deferential even in casual conversation. Ever hang out with a friend who never asks how you’re feeling, never asks about your job, never asks about your interests or your life or your relationship with the Lord? That’s not being deferential.

To be deferential is to yield to the interests or wishes of a friend in significant matters. It is to consider their interests above your own. Offer respect by being deferential.

Conclusion:

Let’s step back now and ► consider the seven aspects of respect Paul models: He offers his friend respect by being gentle, vulnerable, tactful, sympathetic, honest, open, and deferential.

This isn’t a complete list of ways we can offer respect, but it’s a pretty good menu from which to choose something to work on this week. Which one of the seven elements of respect stands out to you? What would the Lord have you work on this week?

Seven is way too many for me to handle at one time, so I prayed about it, and I’m choosing to work on being more sympathetic, as the Lord leads. I’m asking the Lord to show me opportunities in the midst of interactions with my friends—opportunities to be sympathetic. In particular, I think I need to focus on Cathy. Specifically, I’m going to keep asking myself the question: What can I say in this moment that will acknowledge how she feels and convey how I feel for her in response? That’s how I can offer respect.