

Challenged – Philemon – Sermon on September 22 – Small Group Notes

Today we are getting into something Spiritual Friendship can include that can be very helpful, but also very scary. The focus today is on having the sort of friendships where we can challenge each other.

- Where, in society, can you see the power of challenge or accountability? Can you think of any examples?
- What do you think it was like for Paul to realise that he knew both the runaway slave Onesimus, and his master Philemon... even though they were so far apart?
- Have you ever felt like God was guiding you in a way that felt exciting?
- If you were sitting with Onesimus, in Paul's place, what would you say?
- In what ways, do you think, it might have been difficult, risky, or costly for Onesimus to gain his freedom?
- We understand why someone would do this for their freedom. Why, do you think, it was worth it for him to make the journey back?
- Paul's challenge to Onesimus and Philemon would have been costly and risky for each of them. What risk or cost might have been involved for each of them?

I want you to notice something important about challenge... It tests the limits of our friendship. In other words our friendship needs to be secure enough that it can withstand the level of challenge that is being brought. When this works well it can be incredibly powerful.

- What does a relationship need for challenge to work?

I want you to see several things that might help us if, or when, we have friends that we should challenge. **The goal is to build the other person up (not tear them down).**

Notice how the letter is full of encouragement. We don't even get the request until about verse 10.

Read Philemon 1:1-7

- What examples of encouragement stand out to you from these verses?

Notice that Paul is optimistic in his stance toward Philemon.

Read Philemon 1:21

The goal here is to build your friend up. If your motivation is not pure... you shouldn't say anything.

Your heart should be humble (instead of proud or judgmental).

Notice the humility in how the request is brought. Philemon is not being forced to do anything here.

Read Philemon 1:8-16

How can you hear Paul's 'father's heart' in these verses?

Love is a significant theme in this letter.

- In what ways can you see this theme expressed?
- What else do you find striking in these verses?

Be persuasive if necessary! I love how Paul applies some pressure in this letter.

Read Philemon 1:17-25

- In what ways, throughout this letter, can you see Paul applying some pressure?
- When is it appropriate to 'apply pressure' and when is it unwise?
- When challenging someone else we need to be aware of how it will be received. How can we be sensitive to this?

There is a difference between challenge and accountability. They are similar, but accountability is often easier to enter into.

- Why do you think this is?

Epilogue

We don't know how the story of Philemon and Onesimus ended. We do know that the letter we have, as the book of Philemon, is only available to us because a slave carried it all the way from Rome to Colosse. Philemon shared that letter with others. Copies were made and it was passed down to us.

I think it is reasonable to assume, from what we know, that Philemon only shared this letter because, under Paul's guidance, he was brought back together with Onesimus... master and runaway slave were brought together as brothers. An act that would have shocked the culture they were part of.

This was only possible because Paul took the risk of being willing to challenge both Onesimus and Philemon.