

Family

Paul's Letter to Philemon

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(GA) If you watch SportsCenter[®] or read the “sports” pages in your newspapers, almost all football stories are about quarterbacks, running backs, and wide receivers.

A. But if you look at the bankroll of a national football team, you'll see that the people earning the second highest paychecks are the left tackles.

1. Michael Lewis wrote a book a few years ago titled *The Blind Side*, and in this book he explains how the left tackle on a football team are often anonymous players – their names are never mentioned in the papers, or on TV, or over the loud speaker of a football game.
 - a. Yet most people associated with football recognize this position as the second most important on a team, second only to the quarterback.
2. Lewis said that the importance of the left tackle position can be traced all the way back to a Monday Night Football game in 1985.
 - a. In front of a viewing audience of 17 million people, powerhouse Lawrence Taylor came around the corner and blind sighted Joe Theismann, breaking his leg.
3. You see, most quarterbacks, like Joe Theismann, are right-handed, which means that they often drop back and lose sight of the left side of the field. The left tackle's main purpose is to prevent his QB from getting slammed into by someone coming from the left.
 - a. Lewis describes how left tackles today must weigh 300 pounds and have long arms and be incredibly quick on their feet. In 2004, the average salary of a left tackle in the NFL was \$5.5 million a year. Only a starting quarterback makes more.¹

(SN) We all kind of need a left tackle, don't we? With all the threats in life just waiting to blind-side us – people out there who'd like to hurt us, stress at work or in society, an enemy who attacks us through lies – we all need people who are watching our blind-spots.

A. We've been talking for a couple weeks about the providence of God and how He perfectly supplies for His creation.

1. Well one of the good ways that God supplies for us is by providing a left tackle to watch over us... support us... and protect us.
 - a. What is this left tackle in our lives? It's our family – our spouse, our children, our parents, our brothers and sisters.

B. There's a really great verse in *Psalms 68*. I like how the NIV brings out the meaning of *verse 6*: “God sets the lonely in families.” This word lonely is also the word “solitary”.

1. The first human that God made, Adam, felt lonely. After naming all the animals – watching them parade by him in twos, each with a mate – Adam finished that process realizing that there was no ‘other’ for him.
 - a. Every animal stood by another of their kind... a mate... a companion. This first job that God gave to Adam awoke in him the sense that he was lonely, or solitary.
2. So God put Adam in a family.

¹ Sam McKee, *Sunnyvale, California*; source: NPR, *All Things Considered* (10-10-06)

a. Mike Mason writes in *The Mystery of Marriage*: “Adam was a man alone, a singleton. But in the company of Eve he became a race, a corporate body.”²

C. Our good and loving God has given us our family to play left tackle in our lives. This is why it is so sad when families can’t get along... or marriages or siblings or children throw in the towel.

1. I’ve wanted to preach on the family for some time now. The idea of children being born into a family that cares for them... and then as they grow they care for their siblings, and parents, and grandparents... I just love that picture of God’s providential care and goodness toward people through families.

a. Yet, the more I thought about this sermon on family, the more I realized that for many people, this gift from God called “family,” has been the gift that’s kept on giving... giving *pain*.

i. Many people today are estranged from parents, or siblings... marriages are falling apart left and right...

ii. Many wives out there have been hurt the worst by their husbands... or visa versa...

i. It struck me that those who know us best, also know how to hurt us with the most skill... and they choose to do it sometimes.

2. If family is supposed to be our left tackle, it sure seems like there are a lot of left tackles sleeping on the job.

a. Or worse, they’ve switched sides – put on our opponent’s uniform and now they’re getting in a few licks of their own.

i. I came to the conclusion that the best thing we can look at today as we discuss the family, is how to keep our left tackles in tact – how to be a healthy left tackle for those God wants to bless through us.

(S) So what does it take? What is required from you and me to be the support and strength that God wants us to be for our family?

A. It takes truth and exhortations we see in Paul’s letter to Philemon, if you’ll turn there with me.

1. Philemon isn’t written about families, necessarily. It is written about a household... but the issue involves a slave and a master.

a. You see, Philemon was a new Christian who lived in Colossae. It sometime between AD 61-63, one of Philemon’s slaves deserted him. There appears to be some crime that was committed that caused this slave to flee Philemon’s house.

i. This is where the story gets interesting. This fugitive flees to Rome, where Paul is under house arrest. Paul was allowed to have people visit, and so he’d preach the gospel from his house to dozens of people at a time. This slave ended up at Paul’s house and he became a Christian.

2. So now we’ve got an interesting, sticky situation, don’t we? You’ve got Paul who is the spiritual father of both these new Christians. Spiritually, they’re one family.

a. But on a relational level – a human level – they want nothing to do with one another.

i. One committed a crime against the other and then fled.

ii. One was the one offended... the one deserted... the one cheated.

a) Philemon has every right to want revenge on Onesimus...

3. Sounds like what happens in our families, doesn’t it?

a. We all have sin, or dirt, and our dirt rubs off on one another. We especially get our families dirty with our gunk.

² Mason, Mike. “The Mystery of Marriage.” Multnomah: Sisters, OR. 1985. p. 58.

- i. We say things that hurt each other... we do self-centered things that run over one another.
- ii. We live out our bad habits, or sin, right in front of them.
- iii. There's probably no place where offense is created more frequently, or deeply, than in the family.
 - a) I was with someone this past week who went through something difficult. She received phone call after phone call from friends, people from church, even distant relatives and in-laws... all encouraging and uplifting.
 - i) The most upsetting call was from her mother, who put her through feelings of guilt and shame that only her mother, who knows her well, would know how to do.
 - b. Family members get each other dirty all the time. And sometimes this offense feels too much – and we want to give up. Say good-bye to our left tackle and just live with the blind spot.
 - i. And there are many of us that have done just that... and we're living wounded.
 - a. We can relate to Philemon, someone who has been wronged and is upset and feels he has certain rights to what should happen to the one who's wronged him.

4. With that in mind, let me read this letter and we'll listen to how Paul handles this situation. *Read Philemon*

B. I'm not sure that you and I can fully appreciate what Paul just asked of Philemon. In Roman civilization, a slave wasn't human – didn't receive rights as a person. Justice wasn't an issue for slaves – an owner could do anything he wanted.

- 1. Just like a homeowner could beat a rug that he owned without anyone batting an eye... a slave owner could beat a slave without anyone batting an eye. A slave was simply property, like a rug.
 - a. And a slave that upset his owner... let alone robbed and deserted him... deserved the worst a slave owner could deliver.
 - i. And Philemon was a Christian – but he was a new Christian and a slave owner and we don't know how much he grasped of loving and honoring the people God created.
 - a) We would be right to assume that Philemon was mad and was ready to hand out some pretty good punishment the next time this non-human slave showed his face.
- 2. So this is a BIG request Paul is making.
 - a. Paul's asking Philemon to forgive Onesimus and see him as a brother, a brother-in-Christ.
 - i. How can Paul make this request? It's the same question you might be asking of me, "How can the pastor exhort me to love and forgive and support my family? After what my dad has done?" Or, "After what my sister is doing to me right now?"

C. Friends, Paul makes this request of Philemon because of the grace of God in Philemon's life.

- 1. Paul begins this request in a very important, strategic way – he reminds Philemon of Jesus and the mercy Jesus gave *to him*.
 - a. In *verse 1*, Paul calls himself a prisoner for Christ Jesus... and then calls Philemon "our beloved fellow worker" – worker of the gospel of Jesus Christ.
 - b. Then in *verse 3*, Paul frames the letter with the grace and peace of God.

c. And then in *verses 4-7*, Paul celebrates Philemon's love and faith and ministry toward Jesus and His saints.

i. This is celebrating the change in Philemon's heart... the evidence of the Spirit of God's work.

2. Why should Philemon listen to Paul and agree to accept Onesimus back, and not as a slave but as a brother?

a. Because Philemon has experienced the same grace and mercy and second chance from Jesus that he's being asked to do for Onesimus.

b. Paul's entire letter keeps returning to Philemon's own release from debt, or sin.

i. One of my favorite lines that Paul ever wrote – I think it shows his spunk – is in this letter.

a) Just in case Philemon doesn't pick up and remember the grace of Jesus toward him in the introductory verses... Paul makes quick statement reminding Philemon that it was through Paul that God did what Paul is asking Philemon to do now.

ii. Look at verse 18 again – Paul says that if Onesimus owes anything, Paul will pay it. But then Paul reminds Philemon that this would be a bit foolish to require... since Philemon owes Paul big time for helping him find grace.

Read vs. 18-20

3. You see, the grace of God should motivate us, Paul says. And, whether it motivates us or not... **it certainly obligates us.**

D. This is what the gospel of Jesus Christ does in our lives, doesn't it? It makes it possible and requires us to show grace and mercy and second chances, or fiftieth chances, to anyone who hurts us.

1. At the heart of the gospel is the idea that you and I – the children of God – have turned our backs on our Father. As far as families go, we've blown it with ours.

a. We've taken our Dad's good gifts... His parental love... His supply and provision... and we've thrown it in His face through sin.

i. We don't deserve to be forgiven by God any more than Onesimus deserves to be forgiven by Philemon. In fact, like Philemon, we deserve death... punishment.

2. But **thank GOD!** that *Psalms 103:10* says, "God does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities." We have a merciful Father.

a. And this mercy should send us out with a passion to show mercy & grace to those who hurt us the worst!

i. Grace saturates this letter – this request that Paul makes to Philemon to forgive and not just re-instate Onesimus as a slave, but elevate him as a brother!

E. So how do we put our pads and helmets on, and be the left tackle for our family members who often frustrate or wound or hurt us time and time again?

1. We bear with one another, showing each other the same grace and mercy and forgiveness that Jesus shows us every day.

a. Onesimus didn't deserve to go home... be accepted back, he didn't deserve the new status of a brother in Christ...

i. But neither did Philemon...

ii. And neither did I...

iii. And neither did you.

F. And by the way, many of us come from families who don't know Christ. Does it make a difference whether we're in families with Christians or not, when it comes to showing the grace and mercy that God has showed us?

1. I'm the only one in my family – meaning, my mother, father, sister and brother-in-law who loves Jesus and calls them self a Christian.” I'm the black sheep of our family... made white... but still black... ..

a. Friends, the providence of God is so large and mysterious that He protects and cares for the Christian and non-Christian, doesn't He? Through families.

i. God calls me to this same exercise of grace and forgiveness to my non-Christian relatives as to my Christian ones... because He wants to bless and support and protect my non-Christian family members through me.

a) And this might be one of the best ways I can witness to them!

2. Now there is something different, or special, when families are made up of believers.

When two people who love Jesus accept this command to love and show mercy and grace, there is a chance for biblical reconciliation.

a. But the fact that you might be the only Christian in your family doesn't free you up from showing the same grace and mercy to your family that Christ showed you.

(VR) Friends, I know that love and forgiveness in the context of family can be so difficult.

A. When I was a kid and I'd go up against the largest challenge – pitch in the big game, or take an entrance exam for college – my dad would often say to me, “Zeke, this situation will test your metal!”

1. For many of us, loving our family as God loves us – whether they're Christians or not – that tests our metal!

a. Paul was well aware that he was putting Philemon through the largest of tests – that's why Paul wrote such a thoughtful, intentional letter. Paul knows he's testing Philemon's metal!

B. Paul says to Philemon in *verse 5*, “I hear of your love and of the faith that you have toward the Lord Jesus and all the saints” – and then, it's as if he goes on to say, “Let's see if this love of yours is able to pass the real test. Let's see if it's genuine. Let's see if you will dig down deep into the well of Christ's grace in order to show grace to someone you deserve to be angry with.”

1. I know that many of you have been deeply hurt by a spouse... or a parent... or a sibling... or a child.

a. I know that for some, the idea of showing the grace and mercy of God to your family member could be the hardest thing you'll ever do.

i. But friends, this is the responsibility that the grace of God puts on our head.

C. And this is how we bear with one another as families – we live in this habit of grace and mercy and second-chances, or fiftieth chances... and keep ourselves on the field, suited up, looking out for one another's blind spots.

1. Just don't expect \$5.5 million for doing the job.

a. Wouldn't that be nice, huh?

Ephesians 4:32