

The Appeal for a Slave

Philemon 1:8-16

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The theme of love runs deep throughout the letter of Philemon, but what does it look like when the use of power is motivated by the love of God?

Power that is motivated by the Love of God is:

1. A love that appeals for the weak

Power when motivated by self-love is destructive but when motivated by the love of God, is life-giving. Paul uses his power not to command, but to appeal for the sake of love (vv.8-9). For love's sake, Paul patiently and prayerfully appealed to Philemon, hoping not just that he would do the right thing, but also grow in his love. *'Living Christianly makes people more human, not less. No Christian should grumble at the extra demands of love. They are golden opportunities to draw in the reserves of divine love, and in doing so to become more fully oneself in Christ, more completely in the image of God, more authentically human.'* – NT Wright, Tyndale Commentary on Philemon.

Paul recognised that Onesimus could never appeal for himself; he needed help and he stepped in out of love. Let God sanctify us so that we can become more like Him. May we use the power that is entrusted to us to appeal for the weak (children in foster care, unborn babies, domestic helpers, etc.).

2. A love that transforms the useless into someone useful

v10 – Paul was appealing for Onesimus, with whom he had a deep relationship with. Paul considers it a father and son relationship. Ironically, the name

'Onesimus' means 'useful', though Onesimus did not live up to that name and was useless (v11). Despite this, Paul, who saw people through the eyes of God, did not judge Onesimus based on his usefulness. Paul recognised that while Onesimus might have been useless to him, he was not useless to God. More than new skills and perspectives that Onesimus might have acquired after his conversion, it was his new heart and identity as a Christian that brought courage and confidence that made him useful. You are more likely to believe you are useless when you pay more attention to the voice of the world than the voice of God.

3. A love that turns enemy into family

v15 – Paul offered an interpretation to the unfortunate situation of Onesimus running away as God's divine providence that saw Onesimus receiving salvation. This paved the way to Paul's big request – for Philemon to receive Onesimus back not as a servant, but a beloved brother (v16). Paul's appeal was not based on Philemon's feelings; it was based upon the gospel that binds people together through the blood of Christ. Paul was appealing for Philemon to live out the gospel. We will not be able to use our power to love until we realise that like Onesimus, we deserve punishment and death, but because of Jesus' appeal for us through his death on the cross, we are no longer seen as guilty.

Christ appeals for His children out of love. Though He is rich, He became poor

for our sake. Though He is a King with absolute power, He came as a servant to serve those around Him. Like Christ, let us use our power to lovingly appeal for those around us.