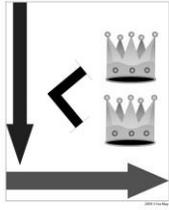


Week Fifty: Kingdom Leaders Reflect Christlikeness - Philemon



Overview

God the King placed Adam and Eve in a perfect environment to reign as His vice-regents on earth. Their rule was to be of service to the world and honor to Him. Instead of serving Him and ruling for Him, however, they listened to the serpent and yielded their kingdom to the enemy. Service gave way to oppression; Cain oppressed and killed Abel, men oppressed each other so much that God destroyed the earth

by the flood, and even

afterwards Nimrod became a ruler who led people away from God.

God raised up Abram as a patriarch who served God and others. He gave the first choice of land to Lot his nephew, he refused the riches of the king of Sodom, and he offered a tithe to Melchizedek. He trained men who were faithful servants (Gen. 24). His great-grandson Joseph rose from servanthood to become an incredible kingdom leader who saved his people from death. He was able to forgive his brothers and serve them because he saw God's greater purpose.

Moses became a mighty leader who brought God's people out of Egypt because he learned the lessons of service in the desert. His education in Egypt taught him worldly wisdom, but his education on the back side of the desert taught him to know God and to serve. He passed along that culture of servant-leadership to Joshua, who graduated from service to Moses to leadership of the Conquest.

Samuel epitomized leadership in the Judges era by his love for God's Word, his faithful circuit ministry to the nation, and his prayer for the people (1 Sam. 7:16; 12:23). He anointed Saul, who began his reign in humility, but he disobeyed God's specific command and so lost the kingdom. His jealousy caused him to focus on David rather than his kingdom leadership and brought destruction to his family by the very enemies that David had defeated. Had Saul stayed on task, the Philistines would have been weak servants rather than powerful foes.

David exemplified leadership of God's people; his training as a shepherd taught him responsibility, his faith in God taught him trust and accountability, and his obedience to his father taught him service to others. He ruled as Israel's greatest king, "administering judgment and justice" (2 Sam. 8:15). Five of his descendants (Solomon, Asa, Jehoshaphat, Hezekiah, and Josiah) ruled well as they followed in his footsteps.

Daniel the prophet served the kings of Babylon and became 3rd ruler of the kingdom because of his wisdom and godliness. Nehemiah the governor ruled the returning peoples wisely with a vision and wisdom from God.

Jesus the King came as a servant leader. He did not seek power over men, but rather ruled by laying down His life for sinners. His loving Lordship epitomized the truth of the gospel; He said, "The Son of man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for the many" (Mk. 10:45).

Paul the apostle followed in the path of Jesus. Though one of the select apostles called under Jesus' authority and commission, Paul's favorite self-description was the lowest form of a servant—"bondslave." His letter to Philemon expresses the Christlike leadership that God seeks for Kingdom leaders.

Lesson Objective:

At the conclusion of this lesson, students will understand that kingdom leaders serve others and lay down their lives on behalf of others. Kingdom authority is earned by laying down one's life, rather than using a position to lord it over others.

Key Truths

God raises up kingdom leaders to serve as representatives of Christ Himself.

God expects kingdom leaders to lead by serving others and by laying down their lives for others.

God entrusts authority and power to leaders when they lay down their lives for others.

Lesson Outline - Philemon 1-25

Paul writes his letter to Philemon while he is in a Roman prison, in approximately A.D. 62. Philemon is the wealthy patron of the church in Colossae, and the church meets in his home. Archippus is the pastor of the church, mentioned by name in Philemon 2 and in Colossians 4:17. Onesimus, the subject of much of the letter, has been a slave in the Philemon's home. He may be Philemon's younger brother (Phi. 16); if so, the story may contain parallels to the parable of the prodigal son (Lk. 15). The story demonstrates Paul's servant leadership in a powerful way.

1. The Salutation from the Apostle (Phi. 1-3).

- **Writer:** As is customary in first-century letters (see Acts 23:25-30), the writer introduces himself first. Paul's introduction is brief because he is well known to the recipients of the letter. He calls himself "a prisoner of Christ Jesus" (1), revealing that he is only in prison because of Christ and that Rome has no actual power over him. His God is so great that Paul sees Rome as doing Christ's bidding. He mentions his companion Timothy in the greeting; Timothy may be Paul's amanuensis.
- **Recipients:** Paul writes this letter primarily to Philemon, whom he calls "beloved" and "fellow-laborer" (1). He mentions Philemon's wife and Archippus, whom he calls a "fellow-soldier" (2). In the Colossian letter, he tells Archippus to fulfill the ministry to which he has been called (Col. 4:17).
- **Greeting:** Paul follows his customary greeting, "Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ" (Phi. 3). People cannot have peace with God until they have received grace from God; submitting to God's grace in Christ brings peace with God. Paul always maintains this order.

2. The Service of the Apostle (4-7, 10). Service is the art of making other people successful. Paul's service strengthens Philemon personally along with the church.

- **Intercession:** Paul's heart of a kingdom leader shines immediately as he moves from the salutation to the body of the letter. He begins by expressing gratitude to God for Philemon, for his "love and faith" for both "the Lord Jesus and toward all the saints" (5). Tucked away in verse 4 is one key to Paul's servant-leadership; he prays for Philemon "always." Paul regularly tells churches and leaders that he prays for them; he is a prayer warrior and an intercessor whose regular habit is to bring their names before God. Every true servant leader is a person of prayer. Paul prays for Philemon's evangelistic efforts (6) and for his ministry to others (7).
- **Encouragement:** Christlike leaders also encourage others; Paul is no exception. He encourages Philemon in various ways: he praises him for his "faith and love"; he rejoices that Philemon shares his faith (6); he acknowledges that Philemon ministers to "the saints" and refreshes them (7). He also knows that Philemon ultimately will obey the Word of the Lord (21).
- **Evangelism:** Christlike leaders are evangelistic; they share the faith of Christ with others and seek to bring them into the kingdom of God. Paul rejoices because God has brought the opportunity to win a fellow-prisoner to faith in Christ. This encounter is no coincidence; God has brought Onesimus—Philemon's slave (and probably his younger brother—see verse 16)—into Paul's prison, so that he can hear the gospel from Paul. Through Paul's witness, Onesimus has been born again (10); the evidence of his submission is his new willingness to return home to a poor relationship with his master in an attempt to make it right (12). Christlike leaders serve others by winning them to Christ and training them to act righteously.

3. The Supplication of the Apostle (8-16). Supplication is the attitude of one who uses appeal rather than authority as the basis for action and obedience.

- **Supplication based on love:** Paul is an older man now (9), and if he wished, he could be bold to command Philemon to do what he says in the present situation (8); however, he refrains from using the power of command and instead appeals to him. He appeals on the basis of love; he has demonstrated love to Philemon over time, so his love is no new profession. Philemon must also act out of love for the Lord Jesus.
- **Supplication based on relationships:** Paul bases his request on relational lines. He appeals to Philemon as "brother" (7), and expects him to act in a brotherly fashion. He focuses on Onesimus as a "son" to Paul (10), who expresses Paul's own "heart" (12). He further reminds Philemon that Onesimus is now a "beloved brother, especially to me but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord" (16). In fact, Paul suggests that his departure accomplished God's purpose of bringing him into the forever family (15). This relational appeal is strengthened by the fact that the former slave was "unprofitable" but now is "profitable" both to Philemon and to Paul (11). The play on words in the original is

unmistakeable; Onesimus means “useful,” but his departure had rendered him “useless.” Now he is restored to usefulness by the gospel.

- **Supplication based on consent:** Paul sees usefulness for Onesimus in several areas; he is now a profitable servant for Philemon (11), and he was helping Paul in prison so much so that Paul longed to keep him for himself (13). Onesimus showed his usefulness, but Paul recognizes that any long-term service to him by Onesimus must come from the voluntary consent of Philemon. Paul appeals to Philemon to consent to receiving Onesimus voluntarily (14). In fact, all true submission to the Lord and His word must be voluntary—“Faith cannot be coerced;” the great preacher Manley Beasley used to say, “Force makes hypocrites.”

4. The Substitution of the Apostle (17-25) Substitution is the act of stepping into the place of another to take their punishment. Jesus is our Substitute who bore our sins; Paul illustrates substitution in several ways as he discusses Onesimus.

- **“On your behalf” (13):** This prepositional phrase, common in the papyri, expresses the idea of one doing something in the place of another. It is used of signatories signing documents for those who cannot write for themselves. It is used several times in Scripture of Christ’s death “for us” or “for our sins” as a picture of substitution. Paul says that he wanted Onesimus to stay and minister to him in prison, basically in the place of Philemon.
- **“Receive him as you would me” (17):** A second clear picture of substitution occurs when Paul writes, “Receive him as you would me.” “If you count me as a partner,” Paul writes, knowing that he is more than a partner in the work. He is the founder and chief of the work; Philemon owes Paul even his very “self” (19), so Paul asks that Onesimus be received in Paul’s place, as though Paul himself came to serve.
- **“Put that on my account. . . . I will repay” (18-19):** A third clear statement of substitution, perfectly portraying the work of the cross in the gospel, is the idea that Paul offers to repay Philemon for any costs Onesimus owes. Paul first says, “Credit it to me.” This accounting term pictures a ledger of debit and credit. Just as Christ took our debits to His account at the cross and credited us with His righteousness, so now Paul applies this picture to himself and Onesimus. Credit his debts to me, and I will repay them on his behalf. Paul lives out the gospel for his brother. Philemon’s willing acceptance of Onesimus will both refresh Paul’s heart (20) and demonstrate his obedience to the gospel (21).
- **“Through your prayers I shall be granted to you” (22):** Paul’s final picture is the intercession of Philemon on his behalf, and the effectiveness of such prayers to bring Paul out of prison to stay with his friend. He follows this picture with greetings from his fellow prisoner (23), fellow laborers (24), and the grace of Jesus (25).

The apostle's simple letter on behalf of Onesimus clearly demonstrates Christlike leadership, characterized by service instead of demand, supplication instead of command, and substitution of self for others.

Application - What does this lesson teach about God? Man? Sin? Redemption?
The Gospel changes how believers interact with one another—they become great forgivers.

The Gospel changes how Christian employers and employees work together.

Christian leaders demonstrate grace toward others and urge others to do likewise.

Summary

God speaks through Paul to show the true nature of Christlike leadership as service.

God acts by saving Onesimus and by refraining from the exercise of power; instead, He appeals on Onesimus' behalf through the apostle. *God reveals* His heart of love and substitution through Paul's attitudes and actions.

Discussion Questions

What style of leadership seems to dominate in churches today? How do the apostle's view of leadership as service and his appeal differ from leadership in the church today?

What are the marks and motives of true leadership exemplified by the apostle?

How does Paul offer a practical picture of doing for people what Jesus would do? How has Paul's experience of Jesus shaped his response to Onesimus and to Philemon?