

About a Slave - Paul's Letter to Philemon

Study 2 - A Thankful Prayer

Introduction

According to the Bible, thankfulness should be one of the key characteristics of God's people. The Book of Psalms, the hymn book of the early church, is filled with songs of thanksgiving and praise to God. And the same emphasis on thanksgiving is found in the New Testament letters. Indeed, in his letter to the Romans, Paul identifies thankfulness to God as one of the key differences between those who know God and those who don't (compare Romans 1:8 and 1:21).

What is also clear throughout the Bible is that thanksgiving is always reasonable, that is, we are not only urged to be thankful but given a reason why we should be. And in this regard, Philemon, verses 4-7, is no exception. In these verses we once again find Paul in prayer for his fellow Christians, something he did often and something which is a great example for us to follow. And as usual Paul's prayer begins with thanks to God before it turns brings any requests to God. Here to we are reminded that God should come first in our prayers.

As we shall see, there are two things in particular for which Paul is thankful to God. First he is thankful for Philemon's faith. Second he is thankful for Philemon's love for all God's people. Thus according to Paul, both faith and love are gifts from God, not things that come from within ourselves. It is also worth noting the word *all* in verse 2 for later on in the letter Paul is going to call upon Philemon to show love to Onesimus who has become one of God's people. The second reference to Philemon's love for God's people in verse 7 serves to underline the importance of Christian love in Paul's thinking.

In the midst of Paul's words of thanksgiving and encouragement to Philemon we have a very striking prayer for Philemon. It is a prayer that he the man of faith in Jesus and of love for the people of God will be "active in sharing his faith" (vs6). This reminds us as it did Philemon that evangelism is part of the normal Christian life and that we need to be urged to do it. What is striking is the reason that Paul gives for evangelism, for he links our evangelism with our own growth to maturity and enjoyment of our relationship with the Lord.

Read Philemon 4-7



Investigate and Think



1. What words tell us that Paul was grateful, regular and thoughtful in his prayers?
2. What two things about Philemon was Paul especially grateful for?
3. How did Paul know this about Philemon?
4. What does this tell us about Philemon's Christian life?
5. What does Paul pray for Philemon?

6. What reason does Paul give for Philemon to be active in sharing his faith? What is surprising about this reason?

7. How in particular did Philemon show his love for God's people?

8. How did this make Paul feel when he heard about it?



Apply

1. Is what Paul said about Philemon true about you?

2. In what way do you need to change or grow in these things?

3. Are you active in sharing your faith with others?

4. If not, what needs to change for this to be true of you? If you are, how can you encourage others to do so as well?

5. According to this passage, what is the link between our personal growth and enjoyment of our faith and ministry to others?

6. Why do you think evangelism brings mature understanding and real joy?

7. In what way has this passage challenged or encouraged you?