

## **Leadership Beyond Rank and Power**

From the Theology of Work Bible Commentary on Philemon

How does faith change work and leadership? On that question this letter says a lot because it treats how Christ impacts relationships, including relationships that exist in a world of social rank. Social rank shows itself and often controls our assessment of relationships in many spheres: work, home, church, and society at large. Here are some relational dynamics that Paul is focused on Philemon grasping and applying that also carry over into a whole host of contexts.

### **1. Jesus is a leveler when it comes to rank and social status.**

Paul asks Philemon to see Onesimus not in the social world's terms but from within the faith. This changes everything. Paul does not do this once, but three times. The obvious place is where he asks Philemon to consider Onesimus not as a slave but as a brother. However, the second move is where he asks him to receive him as he would Paul, as an apostle. Yet, ironically, the third move is when Paul says he will appeal to Philemon not as an apostle but as a slave of Jesus Christ.

Each one of these appeals has a point. The enhanced status being in Christ gives Onesimus elevates him into a new light. But Paul's other point is his appeal to Philemon to see the apostle as a slave. This makes the profound observation that we all serve Jesus and any power status we have is very relative. The work we do we do as unto the Lord, serving him. Even

apostles serve at the leading and direction of God. This leveling, in both directions, reminds us that behind the rank the world often gives us is our core humanity that makes us all servants of God.

We are called in whatever role we have to serve him well. In fact, one can argue that this is the core appeal that Paul is making here. He is using his stepping back from his authority in humility as the example that sets the stage for what Philemon is being asked to undertake. To say such a perspective is merely a game changer profoundly understates how significant a move this is as the following points show.

**2. Leadership ultimately is not primarily about the exercise of power, status, rights, or efficiency but grounds itself in relationships, a participation that leads to the practical good and affirms new potential.**

The practical good often does involve following through on commitments and doing one's job with integrity, but it also, as here, can mean being forgiving and honoring the potential a person has to change and become a new person. Paul ultimately is asking Philemon to grant and acknowledge this change in Onesimus. To see him in a new light, a light that Jesus has ignited that made Onesimus a different person than the one who had run away.

**3. As a leader, Paul is willing to bear the cost of the sacrifices he asks others to make.**

It is important that Paul, sensing the loss and cost Philemon is asked to bear, is willing to pay for the loss and make sure some sense of justice is maintained as he asks for leniency and compassion. The debt Paul is willing to bear mirrors a parable Jesus tells, where the Good Samaritan not only rescues the man beaten up on the side of the road, but pays the innkeeper for any debt the man will accrue as the man recovers at the inn. This bearing another's burden is part of the "participation" or demands of fellowship Paul is contending for in this letter.

Of course, the supreme example of bearing such a cost on behalf of another is what Jesus did in dying for our sin and paying our spiritual debt. By injecting himself into the relational equation, Paul also makes himself a participant in this situation, becoming part of the fellowship he is calling for Philemon to display.

#### **4. Good leadership appeals to people to act out of their best choices rather than forcing compulsion.**

Paul as a leader is not just seeking for Philemon to make a decision here but to do so with an understanding and appreciation for why it is a good decision. He is appealing to Philemon's free will so that character is developed.

Paul is not just interested in a bottom line decision. There is a famous saying that "He who is convinced against his will is of the same opinion still." In that scenario, nothing really changes. Any act that comes from mere compulsion often is done once and then left behind because the

rationale for it is not really grasped. Once the compulsion is removed the behavior reverts back with no gain for character. Paul wants Philemon to act not because he must but because he should. He wants Philemon to get that profound difference.

### **5. As a leader, Paul can still place moral pressure on those he asks to make a decision.**

One of the more interesting features of this letter is how Paul applies “pressure.” There is a (non)use of power. Paul does not do it so much from rank, but he does do it quite intentionally — relationally — by reminding Philemon of the debt he has to Paul. Paul is not appealing as an apostle, but he is appealing to him based on what he has personally done for Philemon.

Granted Philemon is well aware of who Paul is, but Paul is approaching him on another level. In effect, Paul is saying, if you appreciate how I have related to you with you as the beneficiary, then you will see how I am asking you to treat another. If you can be the beneficiary of such relationships, you can contribute to others in the same way. That this appeal is at a relational level underscores the entire approach of the letter to build a relationally strong response from Philemon. The approach matches the goal.

One also is reminded that we are to learn from God’s example with us. Such lessons may be behind what Paul is asking for, something a text like Philippians 2:6-11 also teaches. Jesus did not regard deity a thing to be

grasped onto but emptied himself into the form of a servant for us, even to the point of dying as an innocent for us. Jesus also tells a parable where a person forgiven a huge debt fails to forgive another a small debt. That forgiven, non-forgiver is rebuked and rejected in the parable for not showing the same forgiveness he had received. Paul is asking for something similar here. If I can serve you to your benefit, Philemon, then you can serve others. If Jesus or I can empty myself for others, so can you.

**6. The final point is that at the core of this request to Philemon was a call to live out one's relationships not by appeal to status, but with an eye to service.**

If Philemon does what Paul asks, then Paul will be refreshed. If Philemon does more than what Paul asks, then Paul will be served in a way that allows Philemon to participate both in Paul's ministry and in Onesimus's service.

When we lead out of concern for building relationship and character, when we are willing to see potential and create space for growth and change in another, and when we are willing to sacrifice in the process, we are serving in our leadership, following not only the model of Paul's request to Philemon but the example of the Lord. That is faith at work, at work in exemplary and sacrificial service that builds relationships and character. Not only does the leader grow, but so do those he or she leads as he or she models how faith works.