

Sermon Series:

# Love One Another

## **BROTHERS AND SISTERS IN CHRIST – Colossians 1:1-2; 3:11-16; 4**

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When my mother died about 20 years ago and my dad remarried, I inherited the family photo albums. Mum had done a great job of arranging all the photos in albums, but they were in those adhesive ones which they have now discovered are horrible for the photos – they quickly discolour and degrade. So I spent a long time dismantling the albums and putting all the photos and the descriptions mum had put with them in boxes. Since then, I have been slowly scanning all the photos and labelling them so they can be kept safe from further degradation and be shared with other family members.

I've loved looking through the pictures! Ones of great-grandparents, and grandparents. Ones which show my parents as children and their wedding. Then my brother and I as we moved around and grew up. And finally, I am reaching ones of my current family. It is hard to believe how much time has passed! For me, family has been a good thing. I realise that this is not so for everyone. But even in difficult and abusive families, the ties are strong. We are connected to our family in ways that cannot be easily broken.

Today we are going to look at the way that the Bible talks about the church as family. For the Biblical writers, this was more than just a metaphor or a picture. The church is not just like a family, it is a family. Last week we saw that when we become a Christian, God makes us a part of His church – down through the ages and around the world – and this is true of us even if we do not attend a local church. In the same way, we become a member of His family, even if we do not align ourselves with a local church family. However, it is hard to develop close ties with people you do not know, and so being a part of a local church family is vitally important for our lives as God's children.

### **... brothers and sisters in Christ. (Colossians 1:2)**

Paul includes family language in his introduction to his letter to church at Colosse. He talks about “our brother Timothy” and “God our Father” and he addresses them as “faithful brothers and sisters in Christ”. How do these relationships come together?

Firstly, God becomes our father, as we read in our Worship focus this earlier.

*See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are! (1 John 3:1)*

If we are all individually children of God, that makes us sibling or brothers and sisters. Christians are called this over 150 times in the New Testament. For people in the early church, this was a very strong relationship. In the world of the Bible, the household was most basic unit of society which included the husband and wife, their children and the wives of their sons, their grandchildren, any slaves they had. All of these ties were strong but the strongest tie was between siblings. This tie was even stronger than marriage which was often an economic, political, or social alliance, not one of love. The ties between brothers and sisters produced strong loyalty, support, and intimacy. According to the Bible, when you become a Christian, we enter a new family with ties as strong as those between siblings.

One explanation before we go any further. You may be used to reading just “brothers” or maybe, if you started your Bible reading with the King James or Revised Standard Versions, the word “brethren” as this relationship was talked about. In those days, I think we understood that this was a generic word for both genders. But it is confusing, especially to new readers of the bible. That is why translations today talk about “brothers and sisters”. This is a translation issue, they are not adding to Scripture.

The Greek language in which the New Testament was originally written does not have different words for brother and sister. It uses the same word with different endings to denote male of female people and a single person or a group of people.

<i>adelphos</i> = brother	<i>adelphē</i> = sister
<i>adelphoi</i> = brothers	<i>adelphai</i> = sisters
<i>adelphoi</i> = brothers and sisters or siblings	

You’ll notice one important thing. When the Greek is talking about a group of siblings of both genders, it uses the same ending on the word as is used to just talk about a group of brothers. In English, we would use the word “siblings” or “brothers and sisters” but the Greek doesn’t have that option. I am not sure why the older translations did not clarify this, but the newer translations have made it clear that both brothers and sisters are being talked about unless there is evidence in the context that it is just referring to brothers.

So, we see that when we think about the relationships between Christians, we need to think about them in terms of being our brothers and sisters, and extremely close relationship. But the Bible has one more thing to add to this picture. It tells us:

*So now Jesus and the ones he makes holy have the same Father. That is why Jesus is not ashamed to call them his brothers and sisters. (Hebrews 2:11)*

Jesus is God and our Saviour, the one through whom we join the family of God. He is not just another human being. However, because He is also the Son of God, there is one sense

in which He is our brother! This is part of what was involved in Him become a human just like us. As one of us, He saved us and He continues to walk with us as our brother – amazing!

### **... clothe yourselves with love ... (Colossians 3:14)**

We've already mentioned the need for us to love one another as good siblings love one another. And I do think this group of siblings does care for one another very much. But Paul tells us that we always have more things to learn about loving each other.

*But we don't need to write to you about the importance of loving each other, the God himself has taught you to love one another. Indeed, you already show your love for all the believers throughout Macedonia. Even so, dear brothers and sisters, we urge you to love them even more. (1 Thessalonians 4:9-10)*

God's love is so much more than our ideas about love. As we allow Him to love us, and change us to be like Him, then our love for each other will grow and we will learn how to demonstrate our love for each other in our everyday lives.

### **... teach and counsel each other ... (Colossians 3:16)**

God also places us in His family to help each other to grow as Christians. We do this better together than when we try to do this on our own. Yes, we have personal relationships with God and times when we should be going apart by ourselves to spend time with Him in prayer and reflection on the Bible. However, God has always intended us to grow together, teaching and supporting each other.

If we look at what the early church did, we see the importance of their life together.

*All the believers devoted themselves to the apostles teaching (learning the truth), and to fellowship (loving community life), and to sharing in meals (including the Lord's Supper), and to prayer (taking their needs to God and listening for His guidance). (Acts 2:42)*

All these things are corporate activities that helped them to learn the truth and apply it to their lives. As they grew closer to each other, they also grew closer to God and vis-a-versa.

### **A "family" case study (Philemon)**

We want to think about our family life together quite a bit this year, and we'll talk more about this next week. However, I wanted to finish this week by looking at what it meant for one church and one leader in that church. To do this, we're going to look briefly at the book of Philemon. It's just one chapter long – only 24 verses – but packs a punch!

We believe that this letter was sent to the Colossian church at the same time as the letter we have been looking at. There are three people involved in this story, although everything which happened would have been known to and watched by the whole church. The letter is written by Paul to Philemon, one of the leaders of the Colossian church. We aren't given all the details of the story; however, we can make some pretty good guesses based on what is written. We can see that Paul was close to Philemon. He had been responsible for Philemon becoming a Christian and he deeply respected him and appreciated his spiritual

maturity and loving leadership of the church. However, at some point, one of Philemon's slaves, Onesimus, had had a conflict with Philemon and run away from him. This was a serious offense which was punishable by death under Roman law.

We may wonder why Philemon, a Christian, had slaves. Christians in those days were still working out how things would have to change now that they were Christians. The society was so dependant on slavery that to change immediately wouldn't have been possible. However, Paul and others are very clear that Christians who owned slaves were to treat them well and were accountable to God for what they did. Unfortunately, this is an area that has not always been handled well by Christians down through the centuries and many areas of the world have suffered because of it.

But to get back to the story ... somehow, Onesimus came in contact with Paul. He might have just bumped into him as he was on the run, although that seems unlikely as Paul says he is in prison or at least under house arrest. It is possible that he regretted his actions and sought out Paul for help in reconciling with Philemon. However it happened, a relationship developed between Paul and Onesimus that resulted in Onesimus also becoming a Christian and becoming a part of the community of believers around Paul. Paul knows that the situation needs to be resolved, Onesimus can't just stay with him while he is legally a runaway slave, and so he writes to Philemon.

Paul was an apostle which gave him a level of authority in the church. He could have written to Philemon and commanded him to do the right thing. But that is not what he chooses to do. Instead, Paul chooses to address Philemon as a brother in Christ. He says:

*Your love has given me much joy and comfort, my brother, for your kindness has often refreshed the hearts of God's people. That is why I am boldly asking a favour of you. I could demand it in the name of Christ because it is the right thing for you to do. But because of our love, I prefer simply to ask you. (v. 7-9)*

Paul doesn't want to exert his authority, but rather appeal to his kindness. In doing so, Paul puts himself on the same level as Philemon, as brothers in Christ. Within the family of God, we are equals as brothers and sisters. Yes, we have different roles and some of those roles carry a level of authority in proclaiming the truth and guiding the church. However, this does not mean that those who hold those roles are better than others in the family or have the right to demand obedience. Paul's primary identity was as Philemon's brother in Christ, not as an apostle.

He goes on to make his request of Philemon, starting by explaining a change which has happened.

*I appeal to you to show kindness to my child, Onesimus, I became his father in the faith while here in prison. (v. 10)*

Onesimus has become a Christian as well which means that he is now a brother in Christ. This means that he is also a brother in Christ to Philemon.

*He is no longer just a slave to you. He is more than a slave, for he is a beloved brother, especially to me. Now he will mean much more to you, both as a man and as a brother in the Lord. (v. 16)*

Philemon's relationship to Onesimus will have to totally change based on this new reality. We do not live in a society where slavery is common – servants aren't even common. Therefore, I don't think we can understand the enormity of what Paul is asking Philemon to do. Everything will have to change and all that we have looked at today will come into play. I wonder if Paul included some things he said in the Colossian letter in part to help Philemon understand what Paul is asking of him here.

First, he's going to have to think about Onesimus in a different way – as a "brother in Christ". Paul helps him to do this by emphasizing his own brotherhood with both Philemon and Onesimus. Apostle, church leader, slave – all equal under the Fatherhood of God. Secondly, he asks Philemon to respond to Onesimus in love, being willing to forgive him. Paul leads the way by showing love to both Onesimus and Philemon by offering to pay any outstanding debts. Finally, Paul does all of this because of a desire for all involved to grow in their relationship with God. It is a difficult situation, but Paul is confident that they can work together to resolve the issue in a way that is an encouragement to all.

We don't know of the outcome of this letter. Onesimus and Philemon are not mentioned again in the Biblical account. However, there is something in the early church records which may give us some hints. About 50 years after this letter was written, a church leader named Ignatius wrote about the bishop of Ephesus, which is a city not far from Colosse where Paul had started a church and lived for several years. Paul's close friend and colleague, Timothy led this church after Paul, and after him, according to Ignatius, was a bishop with the name of Onesimus. We don't know for sure that it was the same Onesimus who was a slave, but church tradition is very strong that it was. This bishop was eventually imprisoned and taken to Rome where he was martyred by stoning or beheading - traditions vary. Today, he is venerated as an apostle and saint and his feast day was this past week on February 15<sup>th</sup>. If this is indeed the same Onesimus, what an ending to the story!

But it could have turned out so much different. If Philemon had not accepted him as a brother in Christ, then Onesimus would have lived out his life as a runaway slave with no hope. The church, the family of God, would have been bereft of an important brother and leader. But it was not an easy thing for Philemon to do. In fact, it was a personally costly thing to do and revolutionary in his culture. Being brothers and sisters in Christ is costly and may involve sacrificing our own desires in order to show true love to one another.

What does it mean to you to be a part of God's family – globally and locally? What do we need to do to foster this kind of close connection among us here in this local family of God? I want to explore this a bit more next week, but I would ask you to be praying about it as well. I am always open to hearing your thoughts as we seek to be brothers and sisters in Christ.