

THE PEOPLE LOVING PLACE - The Appeal of Love

(Sean Opens the Sermon)

Introduction

Last week, we began this little letter by asking a big question: **What does The People Loving Place actually look like?**

Before Paul ever addressed the conflict between Philemon and Onesimus, he celebrated what the grace of God had already produced in Philemon. He saw faith. He saw love. He saw a man who had become known for refreshing the hearts of God's people.

But now we come to verse 8, and the letter begins to turn.

Because it's one thing to love when the relationship is easy. It's another thing to love when you've been wronged.

Onesimus is coming home. And Philemon is going to have to decide what to do with the man who hurt him.

That means this isn't simply a story about forgiveness. It's also a story about **power**.

- Philemon has power in this relationship.
- Paul has authority as an apostle.
- Onesimus is the one with the least power in the room.

And suddenly the question becomes: **What does the gospel do to the way we use power?**

That question isn't only for leaders. Every one of us has influence somewhere. Parents have influence with their children. Employers with employees. Pastors with congregations. Teachers with students. Husbands and wives influence one another. Friends influence friends.

You may not have a title. You may not have a position. But somewhere in your life, somebody is affected by how you use your influence.

The question isn't whether you have influence. The question is what you do with the influence God has given you.

Main Scripture: Philemon 8-11

Therefore, although in Christ I could be bold and order you to do what you ought to do, ⁹ yet I prefer to appeal to you on the basis of love. It is as none other than Paul—an old man and now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus— ¹⁰ that I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, who became my son while I was in chains. ¹¹ Formerly he was useless to you, but now he has become useful both to you and to me.

Historical Context

Remember where we are in the story. Paul is writing from prison. Onesimus had run away from Philemon, but through Paul's ministry he encountered Jesus Christ. His life is now being transformed by the gospel, and Paul is sending him home.

Philemon is about to face a decision. And Paul could simply tell him what to do.

In fact, Paul makes it clear that he possesses the authority to do exactly that. But he chooses another way. Paul essentially says, *"I could command you, but I would rather appeal to you on the basis of love."*

Paul isn't pretending authority doesn't exist. What is remarkable is that he willingly restrains the use of his power for the sake of love.

Having power and needing to prove your power are two very different things. And that's where this passage begins confronting us.

Big Idea: The gospel transforms power into an opportunity to love.

Fallen Condition Focus

Because sin doesn't only affect what we want. **Sin affects what we do when we have the ability to get what we want.** Our instinct is often to control.

Sometimes we use our position. Sometimes pressure. Sometimes guilt. Sometimes anger. Sometimes we withdraw affection until somebody gives us the response we're looking for.

And here's what makes this uncomfortable: **We can be right about what someone should do and still be wrong in the way we try to make them do it.**

Paul believes there is a right response. He says plainly that he could order Philemon to do *"what you ought to do."*

So love doesn't mean truth no longer matters. Truth matters. Obedience matters. But the gospel doesn't only transform **what** we want for people. It transforms **how** we lead them toward what is right.

Point One (Sean) — Love Doesn't Need to Prove Its Power

Philemon 8–9 "Therefore, although in Christ I could be bold and order you to do what you ought to do, yet I prefer to appeal to you on the basis of love..."

Paul knows what authority he possesses. But he doesn't lead with it.

That's important. **Christian humility isn't pretending you don't have authority. It's refusing to use authority for yourself when love can accomplish something greater.**

There's also something important in Paul's phrase "**what you ought to do.**"

Paul isn't compromising truth. He knows there's a right response. Love doesn't mean truth no longer matters. **Love changes how we lead someone toward what is right.** That distinction is huge.

Love doesn't lower the standard. Love changes the posture with which we call people toward it.

That's very Wesleyan, too. Grace doesn't remove obedience; grace creates the conditions in which genuine obedience can flourish.

Point Two (Alberto) — Love Appeals to the Heart, Not Just Behavior

Philemon 9–10 Paul says: "...I *prefer to appeal to you* on the basis of *love*." Then he chooses to identify himself in this way: "Paul—an old man and now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus..."

Paul could leverage his title. He could speak coming from a place of accomplishment and spiritual authority, but instead, he chooses to make himself vulnerable. You know what the origin of the word vulnerable is? It means *woundable*, able to be hurt. He appeals to Him in

a way where he knows he *could* be let down by Philemon, he could be hurt and disappointed while choosing to humble himself in this way-but he does it anyways. Why would he do that?

Well it says: "I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, who became my son while I was in chains." This is where the text gets really personal and relational. Paul doesn't just want Philemon to **do the right thing**.

He wants Philemon's heart to be transformed enough so that he **wants** to do the right thing- he wants Philemon to **want** to do what love requires. Paul's desire is mirroring God's desire for all of us that we might not just comply outwardly while being unchanged in our hearts but that we would also begin to genuinely desire to live out of the same compassion and love that God has for us.

That is the difference between control and discipleship. They might look really similar on the outside, but on the inside it couldn't be any more distinct. Like P Sean likes to say, God isn't interested in just modified behavior; He's interested in our spiritual transformation.

Control can produce compliance. Only love can cultivate transformation.

{I think that's potentially the line of the sermon.}

Because we can force behavior and never reach the heart. We can push people to be more compliant without showing them from our own character how to love the way Jesus did. And again, the thing about this point is, no one gets to sit this one out-this applies to *everybody*...

- Parents need that.
- Pastors need that.

- Leaders need that.
- Married couples need that.

You can win the argument and still lose the relationship. You can get compliance but never produce spiritual maturity. Paul wants something deeper here. Disciples of Jesus are able to see people beyond just their behavior, and desire to influence their hearts the way Jesus has influenced theirs.

Point Three (Alberto) — Love Sees People Through Redemption

Philemon 10–11

This is where Onesimus finally moves to center stage. Verse 11: "Formerly he was useless to you, but now he has become useful both to you and to me."

There's a wordplay here worth using. The name **Onesimus** was associated with being *useful* or *beneficial*. Paul is essentially saying: "*The man whose life wasn't living up to his name has encountered Jesus—and Jesus is rewriting his story.*"

That's fantastic for this series.

Philemon remembers who Onesimus **was**. Paul is asking him to see who Onesimus **is becoming in Christ**.

And there's the challenge: **Power labels people according to their past. Love makes room for what grace is producing in their future.**

That takes us directly back to Week One. Paul celebrated what grace was producing in Philemon; now he's asking Philemon to recognize what grace is producing in Onesimus. In Week One, Paul looked at

Philemon and saw evidence of God's transforming work. Now Philemon is going to have to extend that same gospel vision to somebody who hurt him.

(Sean Closes the Sermon)

Gospel Connection

This is where Philippians 2 belongs. Jesus possessed **all authority**. Yet He came as a servant. He could command. He stooped. He could condemn. He came to save.

He didn't manipulate us into the Kingdom. He loved us all the way to the cross. And importantly, Jesus' humility was not weakness.

The cross is what power looks like when power is surrendered to love. That may be the

Bottom Line

Since we're saving the Bottom Line until the end like we did in Week One, I wouldn't reveal this early.

Or, even tighter: **Christlike influence uses what it has to build people up, not control them.**

Challenge

This could get very personal without becoming accusatory:

Where has God given you influence?

- At home?
- At work?
- In your marriage?
- With your children?
- On a ministry team?
- With employees?
- With friends?

Then: "The question isn't whether you have influence. The question is what happens to people underneath your influence."

That's the Week Two equivalent of Week One's *"What happens to people after they've spent time with me?"*

Then ask: **"Does my influence make people more dependent on me—or more like Jesus?"**

That's an altar-worthy question.

Invitation / Altar Response

I wouldn't make the altar primarily about leadership. I'd bring it back to surrender.

Because some of us have been gripping people.

- Trying to control outcomes.
- Trying to change somebody.
- Trying to make somebody respond the way we think they should.

And Paul's example confronts us: "Maybe tonight the person you need to put on the altar isn't them. Maybe it's your need to control them."

Then move to Jesus.

The One with all authority surrendered Himself in love.

And invite people to surrender their relationships, their positions, their need for control, and ultimately themselves to Christ.

Then we arrive naturally at the series question: **What does The People Loving Place look like?**

The People Loving Place chooses love over power.