

## Life under Grace – Philemon 1-14

### *Introduction, background, and outline*

- **Scripture reading:** Philemon
- **Introduction:** Fill in the blank: “You are not under law but under \_\_\_” (hint Romans 6:14). What does a life under grace look like? The book of Philemon gives us a great example.
- **Features:** At first glance, this letter does not contain any deep theology. But it is filled with practical applications based on theology. If you put on your theologian hat, you won’t get much out of it. But if you read it with an eye of grace, you will see this letter is full of the marks of God’s grace.
- **Background:** Three lives saved by God’s grace- Paul, Philemon and Onesimus. Acts 9 describes how Paul was saved. Philemon was saved because of Paul’s ministry (v19) and offered his home for church meetings. His wife Apphia and son Archippus are important co-workers as well. Onesimus was a runaway slave from Philemon (v15-16) who met Paul in Rome and was saved. (v10). Now he was sent back to his master by Paul (v12).

- **Outline**

#### **Title: Life under grace**

- A: Life of grace has peace
- B: Life of grace prays
- C: Life of grace has faith
- D: Life of grace has love
- E: Life of grace grows
- F: Life of grace speaks graciously
- G: Life of grace shows repentance
- H: Life of grace is useful
- I: Life of grace is self-sacrificial
- J: Life of grace has wisdom

#### **Life of grace has peace (v3)**

- **“Grace to you and peace from God”:** Special greetings in Christian letters. Grace is any undeserved favor from God which He freely gives to us. At the center of all grace is the saving grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. Peace is the fruit of grace. It starts with peace with God as we are reconciled to Him, which then brings about the inner peace of our soul and peace with fellow believers.

#### **Life of grace prays (v4)**

- **“I thank my God always, making mention of you in my prayers”** Paul’s life of grace is also manifested in his thanksgiving prayer. Prayer itself is a grace. Without the saving grace of Jesus Christ, God does not hear our prayer (Isaiah 59:2). Through Jesus’ atoning blood, Christians can now approach God’s throne of grace and call Him Abba Father. This itself is an amazing grace. One who has this grace will not waste it by not using it.
- **“If thou art not a praying person, thou art not a Christian.”** —Richard Baxter

- “**My God**”: Calling God “*My God*” shows the intimacy of believers with God, so much so that they can approach his holy throne without fear, and pour out their heart to him.

Is this your relationship with God? When you pray, do you give thanks to *your* God for all His blessings to you? And do you, like Paul, give thanks to your God for *His works of grace in the lives of your brothers and sisters*?

### **Life of grace has faith (v5)**

- “**because .... the faith which you have toward the Lord Jesus**” Paul saw God’s grace in Philemon’s life, first manifested in his faith in Lord Jesus, as this faith is only given by God’s grace.  
**Ephesians 2:8:** For by grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not of yourselves, it is the gift of God.

Have you given thanks to God for the saving faith of your brothers and sisters in Christ? When there are things that hinder your relationship with brothers/sisters in Christ, remember to thank God for them first, then handle your relationship with the grace of God.

### **Life of grace has love (vv5, 7)**

- “**your love ... toward all the saints**”. Our love toward the Lord is largely manifested in our love toward fellow saints. Faith always produces love.  
**1 John 4:8** The one who does not love does not know God, because God is love.

At the basic level, therefore, every true believer must show love toward fellow saints. But the measure of love varies. Verse 7 shows that Philemon’s love is super abundant, indicating God’s grace is working in him superabundantly.

- “**hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you**”: “Refresh” originally is a military term meaning to rest during long military marches. The lives of early believers are indeed a constant battle surrounded by all kinds of dangers: persecution from the Jews, and from the Romans, attacks of various heresies, etc. Philemon, through his love, brought precious rest and refreshment to these weary saints.

What Philemon did likely include material help (for God gave him a wealthy home) and spiritual encouragement. Love can be shown in different ways as according to gifts, needs and guidance from the Holy Spirit. Christians in fellowship with one another in love will always bring mutual refreshment. This is a mark of the life of grace.

### **Life of grace grows (v6)**

- “**knowledge of every good thing**”: Connected to the prayer in verse 4, this is the content of his prayer. It is a prayer for spiritual growth. Believers in Christ have “every good thing” in them, but to fully know it, they must experience it in life through faith. Knowledge is more than mere head knowledge, but to know it fully through experience. (Example: seeing a picture of Yosemite vs actual visiting it)

You can study what love is from the Bible, but you won't know love until you live out the love with one another; You can learn from the Bible that believers are freed from the bondage to sin, but you won't know it until you overcome actual sins and walk in the path of sanctification by the power of Holy Spirit; You can read about forgiving one another in Christ, but you won't know it until you actually forgive a brother/sister who has offended you. Paul is going to ask Philemon to forgive Onesimus, who is deemed unforgivable by the world. When Philemon does it, he will know the goodness of forgiveness within him.

**2 Peter 3:18** “but grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.”

### **Life of grace speaks graciously (v8-9)**

- **“Though I have enough confidence in Christ to order you ..., yet for love’s sake I rather appeal to you”**: Paul could have used his apostolic authority to command, yet he chose not to do so, because his life had been transformed by God’s grace. Before coming to Christ, Paul was “breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord” (Acts 9:1), but now, he came to know the abundant grace of God in the blood of Jesus that atoned all his sins, so he would rather speak graciously out of love to fellow believers in Christ.

To be sure, he did use his apostolic authority to give harsher teachings when needed (e.g. Galatians and 1 Corinthians), but these were in circumstances where the faith of believers or the holiness of the church was in danger. With Philemon, a dear brother, Paul knew the most effective words are loving encouragement so he could be stimulated to live out more of Christ’s life as His witness.

Paul’s praise at the beginning serves the same purpose– so that Philemon would see that God has already given him so much grace, so he must excel still more, that God’s grace would not be wasted. Proper praise stimulates more good works. We need to learn from Paul and help our brothers/sisters see God’s blessing in them, so as to encourage them to keep up the good work.

### **Life of grace shows repentance (v 10)**

- **“My child Onesimus, whom I have begotten in my imprisonment”**: this is the beginning of Onesimus’s life of grace. When Paul was imprisoned in Rome, he preached the gospel to Onesimus, and the Holy Spirit regenerated him to be a Christian. Paul became his Onesimus’s spiritual father.

Once a runaway slave, Onesimus is now a “faithful and beloved brother” (Col.4:9). The most defining character of a runaway slave is unfaithfulness. A faithful slave would not run away. Obviously, Onesimus had repented. His repentance is shown as he returns to Philemon. True repentance is shown when the sinner takes responsibility for and embraces the consequence of his sin. An unrepentant person would avoid responsibilities and consequences by all means.

### **Life of grace is useful (v11)**

- **“...formerly was useless ... but now is useful...”**: This refers to the usefulness in serving one another in Christ (cf. v.13). According to the value of God’s Kingdom, all unbelievers “have become useless” (Romans 3:12). But Christians, through the new life given by the Lord, can now serve one

another and build each other up. This is all because of the grace we have received, and such mutual service is a necessary mark of a life of grace.

1 Corinthians 15:58: “Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your toil is not in vain in the Lord.”

One of the marks of life of grace is that it is useful for the kingdom of God, which is shown as believers serve one another. If we don’t commit to a life serving one another, we would not see any usefulness.

### **Life of grace is self-sacrificial (v12-14)**

- “**your goodness would not be, in effect, by compulsion but of your own free will**”: Paul originally wanted to keep Onesimus to himself (v.13), but out of love for Philemon, that is, for his spiritual benefit, Paul did not do that. Any good deed done begrudgingly or under compulsion is not pleasing to God (cf. 2 Colossians 9:7, 1 Peter 5:2).

Paul bore the pain of sending Onesimus away, giving up his own benefit for the benefit of his brother. Life of grace is self-sacrificial. Denying oneself is the biblical definition of love. Love must manifest itself in serving one another self-sacrificially. Do you show self-sacrificial love in your life? Is the spiritual benefit of your brothers/sisters what you care the most?

### **Life of grace has wisdom (throughout the letter)**

- Paul could’ve kept Onesimus, but he wisely saw that it’d do more spiritual benefit to his brother if he sent Onesimus back; He could’ve used his apostolic authority to command Philemon, but he wisely saw that a loving plea would better build him up; He could’ve jumped straight to his plea, but he wisely saw that expressing his thanksgiving first would help Philemon see God’s grace in him and stimulate him to show more of His grace through good deeds. More wisdom to be seen in later verses. The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of wisdom, enabling believers to apply biblical truths in different circumstances so we may love one another and glorify our God with the grace He has given to us.

### **Summary and Application**

- These marks of grace are also clear in the lives of our brothers/sisters in our church, aren’t they? We need to be observant of the marks of God’s grace in each other’s life, rather than focusing on what is lacking. Now that we have received such abundant grace, let us always remain thankful to God, and let grace fill our life as the body of Christ!