

## Following the Shirtless Dancing Guy

<sup>1</sup>Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, To Philemon our dear friend and co-worker, <sup>2</sup>to Apphia our sister, to Archippus our fellow soldier, and to the church in your house: <sup>3</sup>Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. <sup>4</sup>When I remember you in my prayers, I always thank my God <sup>5</sup>because I hear of your love for all the saints and your faith toward the Lord Jesus. <sup>6</sup>I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective when you perceive all the good that we may do for Christ. <sup>7</sup>I have indeed received much joy and encouragement from your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you, my brother.

<sup>8</sup>For this reason, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do your duty, <sup>9</sup>yet I would rather appeal to you on the basis of love—and I, Paul, do this as an old man, and now also as a prisoner of Christ Jesus. <sup>10</sup>I am appealing to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I have become during my imprisonment. <sup>11</sup>Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful both to you and to me. <sup>12</sup>I am sending him, that is, my own heart, back to you. <sup>13</sup>I wanted to keep him with me, so that he might be of service to me in your place during my imprisonment for the gospel; <sup>14</sup>but I preferred to do nothing without your consent, in order that your good deed might be voluntary and not something forced. <sup>15</sup>Perhaps this is the reason he was separated from you for a while, so that you might have him back forever, <sup>16</sup>no longer as a slave but more than a slave, a beloved brother—especially to me but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord. <sup>17</sup>So if you consider me your partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. <sup>18</sup>If he has wronged you in any way, or owes you anything, charge that to my account. <sup>19</sup>I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand: I will repay it. I say nothing about your owing me even your own self. <sup>20</sup>Yes, brother, let me have this benefit from you in the Lord! Refresh my heart in Christ. <sup>21</sup>Confident of your obedience, I am writing to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say. <sup>22</sup>One thing more—prepare a guest room for me, for I am hoping through your prayers to be restored to you. <sup>23</sup>Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends greetings to you, <sup>24</sup>and so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke, my fellow workers. <sup>25</sup>The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.

There's a video about leadership and movements going around on the net right now. What you see is a picture of this silly looking guy on a hill at a rock concert- it's actually at the Sasquatch Festival just down the road in the Gorge every summer. And

he's shirtless and just dancing in this open space- his arms flailing around like he's being slowly electrocuted. It's the kind of dance that makes you think to yourself- see, this is why I don't do this. It's the kind of dance that brings your junior high memories suddenly flooding back to you like a bad smell.

But before too long you realize there is a God, because another guy gets up to join him. The shirtless dancing guy high fives this new dude and welcomes him in to his little world. And now, instead of being a nut, the shirtless dancing guy has become a pioneer, the leader of something. Soon, the second guy waves his friends into the group, and a few more gather. Then, the people who like being part of the crowd realize there are more people dancing than sitting, and since they like to fit in, then they jump in, too. By the end of the video, it feels like the entire crowd is up dancing around like they've got some kind of angry creature stuck in their pants.

Now, during the whole thing there's a narrator, a guy named Derek Sivers, talking about what's going on- describing the action that's taking place. And at the end he draws some conclusions about how leadership works. The first conclusion he draws is that if a leader wants to be successful, then the first thing a leader has to do is be open and public, and when anybody joins up to welcome them as an equal and understand that the movement isn't about the leader.

ک ک ک

Now, by this definition, Paul really is a true leader. Throughout his letters Paul consistently seeks to deflect attention away from himself and lavish attention on others.

For instance if you never made it to the end of Romans check it out- at the end of that amazing letter is what amounts to a job reference for a woman, a friend of his named Phoebe to become a leader in the church there. And in First Corinthians he's upset that some people are baptizing in the name of Apollos. And he tells them don't you dare baptize in the name of Paul- baptize in the name of Jesus. Period. Paul knows this movement isn't about him.

And you certainly see this in Philemon, the letter we just heard. A little background here- Philemon is the only undisputed letter of Paul addressed to a single individual. Almost all of his letters are addressed to communities- but in this letter he's addressing one of the leaders of the Colossian church, a man named Philemon. And the letter is about a VERY specific matter, isn't it? It's about a runaway slave named Onesimus. For whatever reason, Onesimus ran away from Philemon and wound up with Paul in prison. And now Paul is sending him back- only he's asking Philemon to receive Onesimus back not as a slave, but as a brother.

But it's the way Paul does this that's stunning.

For one thing, Paul goes out of his way to acknowledge how thankful he is for everything Philemon is doing in the church. Paul notes Philemon's not only caring for his own congregation, but he's caring for the saints- this is Pauline code language for missionaries like himself. Paul tells Philemon that he has personally encouraged Paul and has refreshed his very heart.

And, I guess you could say Paul is just buttering Philemon up, but I really don't think so. Like I said a couple of weeks ago, Paul isn't really known for being nice when he doesn't feel like it- with Paul you can bet he's going to give it to you straight.

And of course the major way you see this is Paul doesn't pull rank on Philemon. When it comes to telling Philemon to let Onesimus go, he says though he could order and demand that Philemon set Onesimus free and receive him back home- he won't do this. This isn't how he works. He wants to appeal to the man's heart- not twist his arm. In other words Paul isn't acting like a Leader with a capital 'L'- he's treating Philemon like an equal.

ک ک ک

Now, here's the interesting thing. According to Sivers, this business about a leader treating others as equal, as important as this is, this isn't the real lesson of the shirtless, dancing guy. The real lesson, he says, is that leaders are over-glorified. Leaders are over-glorified.

See, we are so obsessed with leaders- you got to Amazon or walk into Borders and you will find shelves and shelves about leadership. We think the most important people in the world are leaders- get the right leader and then everything else will take care of itself.

But, when you're watching this video something sticks out like a sore thumb. As important as the shirtless dancing guy is, dancing all alone out there in the grass, before that second guy joins him- he isn't a leader, he's just a nut. To start any kind of

movement, yeah, you have to have someone doing something interesting, a leader, but without that first follower, you've got nothing. Indeed, what makes a leader a leader is when that first follower notices her and takes the risk of joining them out there and starts getting the word out. Siverson points out we're so obsessed with leaders, but if everyone was a leader doing their own thing out in the grass, nothing meaningful would ever happen- we'd just be a bunch of nuts on the lawn.

ک ک ک

And here's the thing. We are so obsessed with leaders, we only tend to read the book of Philemon in one way. All the commentaries talk about is Paul and Philemon. And the real conversation is about Paul both being kind to Philemon and also kind of pushing him at the same time. The conversation is all about Paul as a leader.

And this makes sense to us, because if Paul is anything to us, we all agree he was an amazing leader- starting and nurturing so many communities. I mean if you can't say anything else nice about Paul, you can at least admit the guy worked his tail off, right?

But you know what's fascinating in light of the shirtless, dancing guy? Well, Paul isn't really the shirtless, dancing guy in this letter. Paul isn't just a leader. The shirtless, dancing guy, the leader doing something really different and interesting in the letter of Philemon is the one nobody ever talks about- it's Onesimus.

All we know about Onesimus is that he was a slave owned by Philemon who left. All we know is one day Onesimus wakes up with the bright idea that life doesn't have to be like this- it doesn't have to be masters and slaves. It could be different. It SHOULD

be different. And so, he takes a crazy risk and does something unheard of and he leaves. The best guess about where Paul is when he writes this letter is in prison in Rome. And so Onesimus would have had to walk all the way from the middle of Turkey (Turkey people!), cross the Bosphoros, and then walk across the Via Egnatia and take another ship to get to Italy and then to Rome. And at any point if people figured out he was a runaway slave he would be at least beaten severely but possibly even crucified. Rome was a kind of one strike and you're out kind of place.

So if anyone is the shirtless dancing guy in this letter, if anyone is out there risking being different, risking his very life- it's Onesimus. And Paul has an enormous choice in front of him: does he do the safe thing and sit on the ground and just watch Onesimus; or does he take a risk, does he get up and become the first follower and join this crazy dance?

And of course you already know the answer- Paul isn't just a leader. Maybe more important than anything else he did- Paul knew how to be a good follower. When he sees Onesimus out there doing something interesting, he gets behind him and joins him out there, and then he writes to others like Philemon inviting him to join this ridiculous circle, too.

ک ک ک

Everybody wants to be a leader. I know. But what Silvers says is true- leaders are good; leadership is fine. But good ideas are a dime a dozen. If you want to be a part of

anything interesting, anything meaningful, what you have to learn how to do is to risk being that first follower- risk being that person who gets behind the interesting nuts and support them until we've all been caught up in a dance none of us could have planned on our own.

And really, we of all people should get this. We even have a word for following- it's called discipleship. And we're called to be disciples, called to follow after the nuttiest, shirtless dancing guy of all.

And I suppose the question for us is how many people does it have to take getting behind him until we're willing to get off our tails and stand up and join the fun? **Amen.**