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## NEW LOVE

Has there been a person in your life about whom you were completely optimistic? Who? How did this perspective affect your thoughts and actions?

Think of someone about whom you have neutral or negative feelings. How would your thoughts about and actions toward them change if you thought of them primarily as a child of God?

Is there someone you have forgiven but worked to keep out of your life? What would reengaging with them in a way that nurtures their best look like?

**Philemon 15-16** – <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.

### I) **The Power of Optimism...**

We study our surroundings to learn the causes of everything. We generalize what we observe by developing patterns we can apply to future situations. Once bitten, twice shy. This way of life makes sense for simple creatures whose survival depends on recognizing threats while there is time to avoid danger. It's fine for those of us who want merely to survive, accepting a cheap imitation of life. One in which the primary driver of our thoughts is fear, which leads to a constant defensiveness. Jesus did not save us to survive—He wants us to thrive, requiring an optimistic outlook founded on faith that Jesus has done what He promised to do. Indiscriminate love is possible when we seek and find the evidence of God.

◆ **Possibilities:** The problem with applying patterns to every situation is it leaves no room for the many possibilities. Once we believe a form

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of abuse is caused by evil intentions of a wicked heart, we apply that knowledge every time we sense abuse. This protects us and spares us the work of inspecting each scenario for a novel cause. Yet, as we ourselves want others to recognize, each situation is unique and most of our bad behavior can be justified. Jesus wants us to open our minds and hearts to the possibilities of goodness. “Perhaps this is the reason he was separated from you for a while... (Philemon 15).” Words of uncertainty including *perhaps* and *maybe* are rare in the Bible. We look to it for proclamations. Here, Scripture trains us how to deal with possibilities. Look for the one touched by the hand of God.

♦**In which God is evident**: Opening ourselves to possibilities is a form of curiosity. Our minds work through an inventory of potential chains of events and the actors who would be involved. It takes removing our bias that causes us to refuse to consider options we dislike. Few of us want to justify another’s hurtful abuse, but that’s part of the process of being open hearted. This is the foundation of Christian optimism. Jesus asks us to consider all the possibilities and choose to believe the one in which He is an actor influencing the chain of events. Only He can cause a situation in which it could be said, “so that you might have him back forever (v15).” Eternity is a situation in which God is evident.

## II) Transforming the Mind...

Opening the mind is an act of allowing it to be transformed. This does not necessitate weakness of conviction or thought. It requires the courage to accept new insights that might change old conclusions. It takes a willingness to work out how new conclusions about one subject cascade into changing views on other subjects. I was once convinced I was unworthy of God. He proved that was untrue. Only laziness or rebellion can keep me from letting that domino knock down my belief that others are unworthy. Then, I must accept that I have a responsibility to create conditions that will bring about their redemption and restoration.

♦**Rejecting the old**: We have many ways of characterizing people that deny the fullness of their potential in Jesus. Our minds do not conceive them as free. We anchor them to some characteristic we decide defines them. This anchoring permanently objectifies them, after which we are unlikely to be curious about them again. Our hearts and minds are closed. Jesus, willing us to open, urges us to reject the old, thinking about another “no longer as a slave... (v16).” Opening ourselves to a changed view of another will cause us to rethink how to

treat them. In ancient Rome, a runaway slave was ruthlessly made an example of the consequence of wickedness. Leniency threatened the social system. Jesus asks us to consider a divine possibility that could upend our entire world.

♦**Accepting the new**: It’s impossible for God to love wickedness. While we keep our concept of another anchored to bad behavior, we cannot love them. Jesus demands that we release our anchors and free others to be who they are, not who they were. Anything less denies His redemption and restoration, evidence that our hearts and minds are not transformed. When we release the anchor, we see others as “more than a slave, a beloved brother (v16).” This is accepting the new.

## III) Love is Action...

Particularly when dealing with others who have abused us, we tend to think of love as forgiveness. This is a righteous change, but only the first part of the change Jesus requires. This is the rejection of the old. Old emotions, that is. Our old concept remains. We hesitate to engage lovingly for fear of what will happen to us. Instead, Jesus pushes us to accept the new being that He has made and engage. Love is a way of living that brings out the most Christlike in another. Love is action.

♦**Thoughts and words...**: We are separated from some of our beloved. They live far from us, so we have little opportunity to live out love as more than thoughts and words. We think of our loved ones to keep the emotions strong, pray for them in belief God honors our prayers and acts on our behalf, and speak to them from time to time. This bond is real but weak. We are told of one who is a “beloved brother—especially to me [one distant] but how much more to you [one near] (v16).” Proximity permits our thoughts and words to become action.

♦**...Become action**: Those who spiritualize love for fear of engaging perceive that love is an inward feeling. Jesus denies that idea as He urges us to think about another as a “beloved brother...both in the flesh and in the Lord (v16).” Love conceives in the heart and is manifest in the flesh. Not the flesh of sin, but our actual body. The extremity of love is intentional engagement with one we think of freshly despite history we must reject. Engagement for the purpose of nurturing Jesus in them. Extreme love is the willingness to glorify Jesus in the life of another we once condemned. New love is planting wildflowers in what was a barren, dry desert.