

Philemon: Bound and Free

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Prayer of Illumination

O God, our guide, set your path clearly before us and lead us to follow you wholeheartedly, for the sake of Jesus Christ, our crucified and risen Lord. Amen.

Background

Our *Wayfare through the Word* takes us to the book of Philemon this morning. It's Paul's shortest and likely last letter—only 336 words long in the Greek language.

It may be short, but it certainly isn't shallow. There are layers of deep relational dynamics going on here. The tone of the book is both warm and bold.

Paul was in prison for preaching the gospel while he composed the letter. He was probably 55-60 years old when he wrote it. The letter is addressed to Philemon, his family members, and the church that met in his house. Paul led Philemon to the Lord earlier in his life. Philemon also happened to be a person of influence and means.

So we need to talk about the elephant in the room:

Philemon owned slaves.

We need to remember, this was a very natural and normal thing in that day in age. To keep ourselves humble, we need to remember slavery still happens today in different forms. So there's an important message here for us—

God loves us in the midst of our imperfections and blind spots.
He did then and he does now.

Yet at the same time, God loves us too much to leave us as we are. He challenges and stretches us to grow and go to new places.

God doesn't write off Philemon for being a slave owner, but he doesn't let him off the hook either. Paul nudges Philemon to do something radical in his time—to *set his slave free*.

One of Philemon's slaves was named Onesimus—which means "Useful." This was one of the most common names for slaves at that time in that region. Traditionally, Onesimus has been understood as a runaway slave. However, recent biblical scholarship reads Paul's letter as a thank you note to Philemon for loaning the services of his slave Onesimus to Paul for a set time that had just expired.

But somewhere during his time of helping Paul, Onesimus was led to faith in Christ by Paul. The slave became a very helpful assistant to Paul in his ministry from prison. So Paul wanted to attest to Onesimus' character in his letter to Philemon that the slave took back with him.

But there's more—within the letter Paul gave a radical nudge, a revolutionary suggestion to Philemon:

Might you consider setting your slave free? Would you dare see him as no longer a slave, but as a brother? Would you be open to even giving up your faithful servant to help me continue Christ's ministry from prison?

Granting Paul's diplomatic, yet daunting request would have huge repercussions for Philemon's world—social, economic, and status ramifications. But these ideas eventually rippled wider throughout history—leading to the abolition of African slavery.

*So, let's hear now the word of the Lord
from Paul's Letter to Philemon.*

NEW TESTAMENT READING: Philemon 1:1-25 (NRSV)

Greeting

Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother,

To Philemon our dear friend and co-worker, to Apphia our sister, to Archippus our fellow soldier, and to the church in your house: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Philemon's Love and Faith

When I remember you in my prayers, I always thank my God because I hear of your love for all the saints and your faith toward the Lord Jesus. I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective when you perceive all the good that we may do for Christ. I have indeed received much joy and encouragement from your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you, my brother.

Plea for Onesimus

For this reason, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do your duty, 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. I am appealing to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I have become during my imprisonment. Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful both to you and to me. I am sending him, that is, my own heart, back to you.

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; but I preferred to do nothing without your consent, in order that your good deed might be voluntary and not something forced. Perhaps this is the reason he was separated from you for a while, so that you might have him back forever, 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.

So if you consider me your partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. If he has wronged you in any way, or owes you anything, charge that to my account. I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand: I will repay it. I say nothing about your owing me even your own self. Yes, brother, let me have this benefit from you in the Lord! Refresh my heart in Christ. Confident of your obedience, I am writing to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say.

One thing more—prepare a guest room for me, for I am hoping through your prayers to be restored to you.

Final Greetings and Benediction

Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends greetings to you, and so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke, my fellow workers.

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.

*The grass withers and the flower fades,
but the Word of God endures forever.*

Thanks be to God.

SERMON – Philemon: Bound and Free

Sticky situations. Difficult conversations. Controversial and complex issues, with lots of baggage.

How do we approach and how do we respond to these seemingly “*darned if you do, danged if you don’t*” moments in our lives? Things like:

- Asking a huge favor or declining a request
- Seeking to move forward after something unfortunate has happened
- Apologizing
- Bringing up a concern or suggesting a solution
- Thoughtfully working through a delicate and complex hot button issue of the day

But then, of course, there are the hardest and most perplexing “first world dilemmas” like—coming to a decision with your spouse or family members on what the right temperature setting should be on the AC!

It’s completely normal to feel awkward or to have your pulse quicken in these situations because in all likelihood:

- A deeply held value is at stake
- We feel vulnerable or our self-esteem is involved
- The outcome is uncertain, and
- We’re hashing these things out with important people in our lives

There are good ways and not so good ways to work through these difficult situations.

Some unhealthy responses are to:

1. Avoid the situation. This is known as the Brush it Under the Rug Philosophy. Bury it. Cover it up. Pretend the problem doesn't even exist. Ignorance is bliss, right?
2. Absorb all of the responsibility. This is also known as the Fetch it Fido Strategy, where you do whatever others tell you to do without considering your own emotions, perspectives, or the broader picture. And you end up losing yourself, your very soul.
3. Attack. This is famously described as the Bull in a China Shop Approach where you ruffle feathers, rock the boat, shock the system ... and have others pick up the pieces after you've moved on to the next room to rattle more cages.

There's a common message these very different strategies share:

- Stay closed, not open
- Resist change
- Don't make mistakes or take chances
- Remain as you are ... you're not free ... you're stuck
- A prisoner to yourself and your strategies

But the good news is the Spirit of Christ writes a plot twist into our lives. He helps us realize that our survival strategies have outlived their usefulness. We have nothing to fear. We can be open. The Spirit has made a way.

"Behold," says Jesus, "I make all things new." You are a new creation, the old has gone, the new has come! Christ has unshackled the chains that hold you!

Psychotherapist Karen Horney gives us some helpful guidance. She wrote that we generally have three ways of handling ourselves in situations of conflict or change—where we either *move away*, *move against*, or *move toward* others.

To move *away* is to avoid or avert the other or situation. To move *against* is to attack or alleviate the other or situation. But to move *toward* is to attend and be attentive to the other or the situation.

So, with great agility and maturity, Paul models for us how to move *toward* others, in the midst of a difficult situation. Paul moves *toward* Philemon.

And so he lays out for us four dance steps to graciously move *toward* and with others:

- The gift of Christian diplomacy
- The primacy of fellowship
- The importance of embracing change, and
- The seeds of liberty

None of us ever totally master these moves—Instead we find ourselves on a life-long journey of trial and error, stumbling and succeeding in our dance choreography *toward* the other.

First, the gift of Christian diplomacy

To me, Paul's letter to Philemon is a breath of fresh air that today's toxic climate desperately needs. As 21st century Christians, we can learn from Paul about how to diplomatically and passionately engage in debates with a spirituality of respect rather than contempt.

The Apostle Paul is a strong personality, and here you see him exercising restraint, while still being passionate. He urges, appeals, requests, implores Philemon—but doesn't bully or ramrod. He's humble.

He goes *toward* him, not around him. He doesn't play dirty or create a straw man. He speaks out of relationship and respect and he knows this situation is by no means cut and dried. Paul *is* willing to provide numerous nudges and hints—to help guide his friend Philemon into taking the right action. As the book of Proverbs says,

"As iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens the wits of another."

So here's the takeaway—Paul makes an appeal for action based on *love*, rather than *law*; *liberty*, rather than *legalism*. His desire is for good to be done from the heart and voluntarily, rather than coerced. For everyone to be considered and all to be blessed.

But in the end, Paul leaves the ball in Philemon's court to do what he thinks Christ would have him do. He entrusts Philemon to God. He lets go. We must do the same with those we love and work with.

My guess is, that with this letter being saved and eventually included in the New Testament canon, Philemon honored Paul's request—and either freed Onesimus or returned him to Paul to be a continued help in Christ's ministry.

Second, we learn from Paul the primacy of fellowship

The Greek word for fellowship that Paul uses here is *koinonia*. *Koinonia* is a beautiful word—a warm partnership and mutual relationship of give and take, all made possible in Christ. *Koinonia's* a spiritual rapport. An *esprit de corps* that develops between believers.

It's the common bond of *koinonia* that holds us together when we feel like we're unraveling. *Koinonia* refreshes our hearts and lifts our spirits. We stand in for each other and we stand up for each other. As Paul says, "*welcome him as you would welcome me.*"

The other's heart becomes my heart. In *koinonia*, we become living parables—little christ, standing in for each other, as we walk in the footsteps of Christ, who stood in our place and took our judgment upon himself.

Koinonia is sharing and carrying one another's burdens. Honoring each other and challenging each other.

Koinonia is a common participation with each other, a to and fro of:

- Sharing in the Lord’s Supper
- Doing a good work side by side
- Receiving and forgiving one another
- Praying for one another, and
- Sharing in the Spirit together

Koinonia keeps us nimble and limber in tense situations.

Koinonia holds the church together, when we’re stretched and pulled in different directions. Fellowship keeps us in one peace—the peace of Christ.

Third, Paul teaches us that personal and collective growth happens when we get out of our comfort zones and into our vulnerability zones.

God is always challenging us, and we’re to compassionately challenge one another. To step out and move toward one another. Toward God. Toward what God is calling us to. This takes courage and vulnerability. Sometimes this entails talking to one another about things that would be *so much easier* to leave unsaid.

Jesus calls us *not* to the wide and easy road, but to the narrow and hard road. That’s where real life is. That’s where the action is.

For Paul, it was worth it to risk the closeness of his relationship with Philemon by inviting him to step out from his place of comfort and familiarity, to a new place of courage, truth, and sacrifice.

Finally, we learn from Paul’s letter about the revolutionary seeds of liberty in the gospel.

Jesus changes things. He transforms what he touches. Our identities, our relationships with others, our hearts, our status before God, our circumstances.

Paul said that in Christ Onesimus was “no longer a slave but *more than a slave*, a beloved brother—my very own heart.”

In Christ, we’re God’s beloved, people of value. We’re no longer enemies of God. We were bought with a price. And so we seek to honor all people and uphold their dignity because we’re all made in God’s image—that’s reason enough.

We value one another—because each of us are of great worth.

Ever so kindly, with tenderness and toughness, Paul challenges us to the way of forgiveness, acceptance, and equality. Of seeing others and seeing ourselves in a new light and a new way.

We’re called to see one another, with the eyes of Christ.

Jesus longs to free us from our old assumptions and attitudes. Whether it be a literal slavery, or a slavery to a certain way of doing things, or slavery to a certain way of thinking.

It is for *freedom* that Christ has set us free. The good news is that God longs to set us free—free from sin, free from our selfishness, free from the mess we often times get ourselves in. We're now free to serve God. By the grace of God, we're free to be responsible. We're bound ... and free.

And when we really think about it, in God's sight all of us are like the good slave Onesimus—needing forgiveness, needing to be set free, and by God's grace, very useful in God's kingdom.

Amen.

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