

Philemon: The Gospel in Street Clothes

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Bible Text: Philemon 1:1-25
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This evening, brothers and sisters, I invite you to turn with me in your Bibles to the New Testament epistle of Philemon, Paul's letter to Philemon. We're going to read and use as our text tonight the entire epistle, one chapter. You'll find the epistle of Philemon following Titus and preceding the epistle to the Hebrews. You'll find this, I believe, on page 1,000 in your pew edition Bible.

1 Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, To Philemon our beloved fellow worker 2 and Apphia our sister and Archippus our fellow soldier, and the church in your house: 3 Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. 4 I thank my God always when I remember you in my prayers, 5 because I hear of your love and of the faith that you have toward the Lord Jesus and for all the saints, 6 and I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective for the full knowledge of every good thing that is in us for the sake of Christ. 7 For I have derived much joy and comfort from your love, my brother, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you. 8 Accordingly, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do what is required, 9 yet for love's sake I prefer to appeal to you--I, Paul, an old man and now a prisoner also for Christ Jesus-- 10 I appeal to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I became in my imprisonment. 11 (Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful to you and to me.) 12 I am sending him back to you, sending my very heart. 13 I would have been glad to keep him with me, in order that he might serve me on your behalf during my imprisonment for the gospel, 14 but I preferred to do nothing without your consent in order that your goodness might not be by compulsion but of your own free will. 15 For this perhaps is why he was parted from you for a while, that you might have him back forever, 16 no longer as a slave but more than a slave, as a beloved brother--especially to me, but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord. 17 So if you consider me your partner, receive him as you would receive me. 18 If he has wronged you at all, or owes you anything, charge that to my account. 19 I, Paul, write this with my own hand: I will repay it--to say nothing of your owing me even your own self. 20 Yes, brother, I want some benefit from you in the Lord. Refresh my heart in Christ. 21

Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say. 22 At the same time, prepare a guest room for me, for I am hoping that through your prayers I will be graciously given to you. 23 Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends greetings to you, 24 and so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke, my fellow workers. 25 The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.

This is the word of God. The grass withers and the flower fades, but the word of our Lord endures forever.

Shall we pray?

Father, it is a remarkable thing that you have given us this vignette, this very brief portrait of Philemon and Paul, the apostle, and Onesimus. We pray that your Spirit would impress upon us through this story what it means to live out of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, that we would see it portrayed not only in Paul's ministry but that we would be encouraged to practice that in our own lives today. So Father, may your Spirit bless this word to our hearts, equipping us, strengthening us, enabling that to do that which you have called us to do. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

Brothers and sisters in our Lord Jesus Christ, we have the privilege this morning of witnessing to see with our very eyes, to touch with our hands, to taste with our mouths, the very Gospel of Jesus Christ in the sacrament, the Word made visible to us for our benefit. But now I want to ask you the question: what difference does it make? What difference does the Gospel make in the way we live our lives? Does the Gospel make any difference in the world? That often is the challenge, isn't it? People will say, "I don't doubt the truthfulness or your conviction about what it is you profess." You believe with your whole heart, no doubt, but practically speaking, how is it relevant? What difference does it make in the way you look at the world around you? What difference does it make in the way you live your life?

What does it mean to live out of the Gospel? I want to challenge you with that thought tonight as the application of the sacrament that we enjoyed this morning. What does it mean to live a Gospel-centered life? Someone once made the remark that if all we had from the New Testament was this letter of Paul to Philemon, this small letter of 25 verses would be sufficient at least to give us a basic understanding, we could deduce from this letter the outline of the Gospel. What do you think? Do you believe that? Do you agree with that? Philemon shows us what the Gospel looks like in street clothes in its practical application.

So tonight I want to proclaim to you this word, first of all, in terms of a crisis and a challenge. A crisis and a challenge. The story of Philemon is a compelling human story. It's a story of the Gospel at work in real life. This is about modeling the message of the cross. Think of it that way. Boys and girls, think of what it means, then, to live in light of what Jesus Christ has done. I think so often we reduce or we narrow the Gospel to simply our souls being saved, that we're someday going to be in heaven, but the Apostle Paul

understands that it's much broader than that, much more comprehensive, it's much richer, much fuller. It's broad and sweeping in its application, even to the point of having a direct bearing upon a very practical and serious situation, a crisis, and to understand that, you have to know something of the background to the epistle.

Paul, as you know, had been ministering in Asia Minor, modern day Turkey, going from town to town, ministering, preaching the Gospel of Jesus Christ. He did not go to the city of Colossae but there was a man from that town several days journey from Ephesus, there was a man named Philemon. He had heard Paul preach and by the power of the Holy Spirit, he came to the conviction that this, indeed, was the truth. He believed in the Lord Jesus Christ. The apostle was a mentor to him. He was a devoted friend and follower of the Apostle Paul.

He was a man of some means, well-to-do, a businessman, and we know from our text tonight, that he had a slave by the name of Onesimus, whose name, interestingly enough, means "useful." Paul recognizes that at least in the history that we have, a very sketchy history, Onesimus was anything but useful prior to the Gospel being proclaimed to him. Onesimus may have been ornery and difficult. He may have been a difficult slave to manage. Hold back the thought for just a moment that you're inclined, perhaps, to just think ill of Philemon. He's a slave owner and the institution of slavery seems so repugnant to us today. Who could possibly be a professing Christian and own a slave? More about that in just a moment.

Here's the crisis: the crisis is simply that Onesimus has run away from Philemon's household. Boys and girls, you may think that's a relatively minor thing. Runaways are certainly a matter of concern but is it a crisis? Yes, it was because in the ancient world, the entire economy was built upon slave labor. Slaves helped business function. They cultivated fields. And for a slave to run away from his master, to flee, and it's very likely that Onesimus as he was fleeing first took some property of his master in order to sell it to turn it into cash or whatever and to barter for it. It was considered a capital offense. Do you understand now as Onesimus flees his master, the authorities in that day had every right to press for the death penalty. In fact, oftentimes runaway slaves were treated with the most horrid cruelty. They were tortured before they were put to death and they were crucified, that agonizingly slow and painful death.

Onesimus, this slave, travels to Ephesus, which is at the very coast of western Asia Minor, western modern day Turkey, and he comes into contact with the Apostle Paul, of all people. It's believed that the Apostle Paul may very well have been imprisoned in Ephesus at this time for his preaching the Gospel. He comes into contact with the Apostle Paul and by God's providence he comes to accept the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Under Paul's friendship and care, Onesimus thrives. He becomes useful to the Apostle Paul: a source of encouragement, a source of blessing. He can share in the labor of ministering to God's people with the Gospel.

That's the crisis. You have a runaway slave who has committed a crime that is worthy of a death sentence and now Paul has him right near him. What is Paul going to do? That's

the challenge. Understand that in that day, and there may have been some within the church, the early church of that day, who would have demanded the death penalty, I imagine the hard right wing, the conservative element, the pro-death penalty people, might say, "This is the law and, Paul, if you condone this sort of behavior, you're going to cause social upheaval. This man has to be returned to Philemon. He has to go through trial and he has to be put to death. There is no other way about it." Imagine if every slave imitated Onesimus' behavior. Not only would you have all these runaway slaves, but the economy would be in shambles. Masters would be ruined. People were saying, I'm sure, even in the church they might be inclined to say, "Paul should not be harboring a fugitive. Paul should not permit this kind of insurrection on the part of a slave."

That was probably the most common reaction to that situation in the first century. By contrast in the 21st century, the response might be this: Paul should have demanded, he should have written to Philemon and demanded that Philemon not press charges and, furthermore, he ought to press Philemon to emancipate this slave immediately. Paul should have at least, at the very least, allowed Onesimus to keep running and never go back to Colossae. In fact, the response among many people today is what Paul did was shameful because Paul should have used his apostolic office, he should have written with apostolic authority and said to the early church and to Christians everywhere in the Mediterranean world that there should be instant emancipation of all the slaves. In the Roman world at that time, it should not be tolerated. But, you see, that would be the equivalent of saying today that because of the pollution problem, because of congestion on the highways, we immediately should cease driving cars and trucks and doing business with cars and trucks. It's absolutely ridiculous. It's impractical. It's reckless.

But I want you to sense tonight the nature of Paul's dilemma, his conundrum, because he's ministering to two people whom he loves dearly, a slave and a master, a fugitive and someone who has been wronged. One person is in the position of weakness. He has no rights, no recourses. There are no attorneys rushing to defend his case. If he goes back to Philemon, most likely he's a dead man. How does Paul minister to that person? On the other hand, the Apostle Paul has very strong feelings for the other person. He's a brother in the Lord, in fact, he says he's a partner. He uses a business word. He's a partner in the work of the Gospel. This other man is a person in a position of strength. He has money. He has legal recourse. He has a long tradition behind him, a cultural tradition which says he has every right to put this fugitive slave to death.

A crisis and a challenge, first of all. Secondly, there is a plea and a perspective. How will Paul rectify the situation? What does he do first of all with Philemon, a man of some means? A man who obviously is hosting what we would call a house church in the town, the city of Colossae? Notice how he addresses Philemon. It's very clear that Paul has great love and appreciation for Philemon's support and faithfulness. He's not throwing out flattery for the sake of flattery. He says in verse 4, "I thank my God always when I remember you in my prayers, because I hear of your love and of the faith that you have toward the Lord Jesus and for all the saints, and I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective for the full knowledge of every good thing that is in us for the sake of Christ." In other words, what he's saying is, "Philemon, you give me such joy, such

pleasure. You refresh my heart because I see the Gospel at work in you. When you heard the Gospel, you believed. Yes, you made certain affirmations about Jesus Christ. Yes, but more than that, I see the Gospel blossoming in your life, particularly in terms of your love for God's people and your love for the Lord himself." Verse 7, "For I have derived much joy and comfort from your love, my brother, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you."

Philemon's faith was a genuine faith. It's been a blessing to many and Paul emphasizes the partnership he shares with Philemon. That's initially how he addresses him, with great warmth and affection. I want you to notice especially how careful, how skillful the Apostle Paul is in how he ministers. He doesn't simply hand out flattery nor does he bully. He doesn't use his authority to bludgeon Philemon, he appeals to him on the basis of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Now look at how the Apostle Paul deals with Onesimus, this fugitive slave. Paul has great affection but he also admonishes him to return to his master. That's a radical thing to ask of a fugitive slave. In that situation in the first century, it's the equivalent of telling someone, "If you go back, you're certain to die but I want you to go back. Go back. That's the right thing to do, and if you need to repay your master, do it." Paul's first concern is what effect his actions will have upon the Gospel.

People have raised the question, no doubt today, that they say things like, "Is Paul condoning slavery? Is Paul someone who is so deeply embedded in his culture that he doesn't see the injustice of slavery, the institution of slavery?" Or they might say, "Well, Paul's a coward. At heart, he's a coward." And there have been many people, by the way, in the history of biblical interpretation who have said when they read this account, they say, "Paul, because you did not press for the emancipation immediately of Onesimus, you've proven yourself to be unreliable in matters of ethics and, therefore, everything you say on the issue of human behavior is suspect." That's been a very common response to this episode.

We may have been crying out for liberation, we see people's rights, we see an injustice. We think back of our own history in our nation and we think with embarrassment of the fact that there were many professing Christians who owned slaves in our country, and there were even Reformed denominations prior to the Civil War and during the Civil War, making the claim that the Bible gave Christians every right to own another man. But Paul sees something far better. His perspective is much wider than simply the issue of freedom versus slavery. Paul sees the Gospel of reconciliation and what he does is he draws a connecting line between the cross of Jesus Christ and this crisis. How will the Gospel of reconciliation by the blood of Jesus Christ, how will that practically speaking, how will that bear fruit in this situation between master and slave?

To Philemon, again, the Apostle Paul deftly encourages Philemon to put the Gospel into practice. Think of what options were available to the Apostle Paul. Like I said a moment ago, perhaps it would have been tempting for Paul to assert his authority, "Thus says the Lord," and to bludgeon Philemon, to press him against his will, to coerce him into

dropping the charges. But Paul doesn't do that and it's not just that Paul is being clever here, Paul is being a wise pastor, a wise shepherd of God's people. I think those of us who are in positions of leadership in the church would do well to notice carefully what the Apostle Paul does. Sometimes, you know, because of impatience, sometimes because of our own immaturity, sometimes out of frustration, we press. We press people, we pursue people maybe with the best of intentions, but we're often very ham-fisted in how we treat the people of God.

Paul shows us what the grace of God does in the work of ministry. He puts the Gospel into practice. He says, "Philemon, I'm not going to coerce you." He says, "I could very well appeal to my authority given by Jesus Christ, but I'm not going to do that. I want you to see. I want you to put the pieces together and see for yourself, to draw your own conclusions in terms of what bearing does the Gospel have upon this crisis. How does reconciliation through Jesus Christ, the unity between slave and free, male and female, Jew and Gentile, what bearing does that have upon this situation." What he suggests to Philemon, who had every legal right to press his claim, what he says to Philemon is not only should Philemon take Onesimus back, not only should he not press charges or exact his revenge, his justice, he says, "You should receive him as a brother." Notice verse 8 and following, "Accordingly, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do what is required, yet for love's sake," here's the skillfulness of the word with the word, "for love's sake I prefer to appeal to you--I, Paul, an old man," he was probably in his 50s, by the way, if even that; he thinks of himself as an old man, "and now a prisoner also for Christ Jesus--I appeal to you." He should receive Onesimus, the slave, back as a brother and make him part of his household.

That's what the Gospel does. That's what grace does in this situation, you see. It doesn't just bring it back to the status quo, it completely transforms the situation. And he hints here also, verse 11, "(Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful to you and to me.) I am sending him back to you, sending my very heart," my very self because Onesimus has become so attached to me, we've grown together so much, our affection is so strong in Christ, that when I send him back, I'm sending myself back. I would have been glad to keep him with me, in order that he might serve me on your behalf during my imprisonment for the gospel, but," notice how skillful, again, the apostle is, "I preferred to do nothing without your consent in order that your goodness might not be by compulsion but of your own free will." And now he just hints. He throws out hints as to what Philemon should do, "For this perhaps is why he was parted from you for a while," why he went through this whole stage of leaving you, "that you might have him back forever," notice, "no longer as a slave," verse 16, "but more than a slave, as a beloved brother--especially to me, but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord." He's building bridges here. He's not creating walls. "So if you consider me your partner, receive him as you would receive me."

How is Paul functioning in this story? This is really what I wanted to drive home to you tonight in terms of the application of the Lord's supper. How is Paul functioning in this story? May I suggest to you that the Apostle Paul is functioning as the embodiment of the Lord Jesus Christ. He is the hands and the feet of the Lord Jesus Christ. He stands

between two estranged parties and he embraces them both. He puts his arm around both of them. He appeals to the cross as the means of reconciliation and a new identity. He says to Philemon and Onesimus, "No longer must you view each other simply as master and slave, employer and employee, the one who has legal rights and the one who has no legal rights. No, I want you to see each other as brothers."

If Philemon is hesitant to enact this, if he's worried, concerned that maybe it will cost him something, maybe because Onesimus stole property and is unable to repay it, Paul says, "If you're concerned about that," he says, "put it to my account. I'll take care of it." Even though he says, "Philemon, even though you owe me your very life, your very self. It's because of my ministry that you came to know the Lord Jesus Christ and you received eternal life. Even though you owe that to me," he says, "put it to my account." This is how he embodies Jesus Christ. He provides the means of reconciliation by bearing the cost himself. He will bear the brunt of the burden. He will enable these two formerly estranged to become brothers. This is the Gospel in street clothes.

Verse 18, "If he has wronged you at all, or owes you anything," Paul says, "charge that to my account. I, Paul, write this with my own hand: I will repay it," and then he simply throws out the suggestion here or the idea, "to say nothing of your owing me even your own self. Yes, brother, I want some benefit from you in the Lord. Refresh my heart in Christ." He goes beyond that and he points ahead to the fact that if Philemon is really confident of doing that which the Gospel compels him to do in which he will gladly submit to do, notice what will happen, "Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say." Do you see what he's hinting at? Paul is hinting to Philemon, "Receive Onesimus back. Don't put him under charges. Don't execute him. Don't torture him." But he doesn't stop there, he says, "Not only receive him as a brother, but consider giving him his freedom." Against all human convention of that day, against what every owner of slaves in that day would have expected, he says, "Consider letting him go, giving him his freedom." He says, "At the same time, prepare a guest room for me, for I am hoping that through your prayers I will be graciously given to you." He's saying, "You know, Philemon, it's very possible I may be released soon, and if I'm released, I want to travel to Colossae and I'd like to see if, in fact, the Gospel is being worked out in your life."

So I close by way of application to you tonight, dear friends, how do you see yourself living out the Gospel? We saw now how the Apostle Paul embodies the Gospel, and how he calls Philemon and Onesimus, these two formerly warring parties, to live out the Gospel, now how about you? Having partaken of the Lord's supper this morning, how are you going to live in a way that reflects the Gospel? I can think of any number of ways. We don't have slaves, we don't have masters to deal with, but there is strife, there is enmity, perhaps there are factions among us that cannot see eye-to-eye. What will the Gospel look like in terms of reconciliation? I think of husbands and wives warring against each other, hostile to each other. What will the Gospel look like in the home not only between husband and wife but between parents and children? Between extended family members? And there is plenty of strife, I know that as your pastor. There's friction. There's hard feelings. There's unresolved conflict between some of you. I know

that firsthand. Not only do I know it, I've been involved in terms of counseling you. How will the Gospel make any difference in the way those matters are resolved? How will the Gospel work itself out at the workplace tomorrow? How will you be like the Apostle Paul when he gives himself completely to reconcile these two parties and says, "If there's anything that needs to be paid, charge it to my account"? How will you do that at work, giving yourself completely on behalf of Jesus Christ? Not being concerned, obsessed with your rights? Not concerned about getting your revenge for wrongs that were inflicted upon you but being truly Christ-like for the sake of the peace of the Gospel of Jesus Christ?

The message of the Gospel that the Apostle Paul brought was not simply from the head and from the mouth. He didn't just speak a good message. He didn't simply write a compelling epistle but he teaches us tonight and the days to come, that the Gospel must come, brothers and sisters, from the heart. It is meant to be lived out and so I challenge you: live out the Gospel not by way of compulsion. I think that's counterproductive. We ought not to hear the word in such a way that we think we're being pummeled into a certain course of action, but put the pieces together yourself in your own situation, whether it be at work or at home with someone who needs to hear the message, someone who is estranged from you, someone who's hurting, someone that you can truly be a blessing to. Draw the conclusions yourself. Refresh my heart. Give praise to God.

May the Lord bless this to our hearts for Jesus' sake.

Let us pray.

Father in heaven, we pray that we may, like Philemon, understand the dimensions of the Gospel, not merely as some abstraction, as some piece of theology that has to be learned or memorized, but as a way of life that we may demonstrate the love and compassion of Jesus Christ; that we may desire to see warring factions reconciled; that we would be willing, painful though it might be, to bear the brunt of the cost for that reconciliation. Make us bold, we pray. Encourage us in this work and may we prove to be an instrument of your righteousness, an instrument of your peace for Jesus' sake. Amen.