

Rights or Generosity
Philemon

Turn to Philemon please. Philemon has only one chapter, and we'll look at all of it. There are three Sundays between now and Advent. We'll leave behind the OT for now, and turn to the NT. In these three Sundays, I plan to speak on three NT Letters that only have one chapter: Philemon, 2 John, 3 John. Today Philemon. Jude another time.

Philemon was a believer in the church at Colossae. We can tell by comparing the end of Colossians and the end of Philemon. Paul wrote Colossians and Philemon at the same time, and sent the two letters together, Colossians for the whole church, and Philemon just for him.

By reading this letter we can piece together a story, and I'll tell you the story first, and then we'll read. Philemon the believer in Colossae had a slave named Onesimus. Onesimus means "profitable, useful," and Paul plays with that. Onesimus the slave ran away from his owner Philemon. Paul was a prisoner in another city.

Wherever Paul was, Onesimus escaped to that city, and somehow met up with Paul the prisoner, and Paul told Onesimus the escaped slave about Christ, and led him to the Lord. Onesimus became a believer, a brother in Christ. And Paul and Onesimus become very fond of one another. Onesimus helped Paul the prisoner a lot in that city, served him and ran errands and so on.

Paul found out that Onesimus belonged Philemon in Colossae, and Paul knew Philemon. Paul tells Onesimus, "Onesimus, you have to go back to your master Philemon. I'll send a letter asking him to be kind to you, but you have to go back to your master Philemon."

In the letter to the Colossians, sent at the same time as the letter to Philemon, Paul says this about Onesimus: he's "our faithful and dear brother, who is one of you." "Onesimus the slave is a faithful and dear brother to Timothy and me, and he's now a part of your church."

In his Letter to Philemon, Paul wants Philemon to be kind-hearted toward Onesimus, who ran away and quite possible stole from Philemon in the process, but is now a brother in the Lord. Paul also hints strongly that what he'd really like is for Philemon to free Onesimus, and send him back to Paul, because Paul wants Onesimus with him. Let's read, starting in Phm 4.

Paul Thanks God for Philemon (Vv4-7)

I always thank my God as I remember you in my prayers, because I hear about your love for all his holy people and your faith in the Lord Jesus. I pray that your partnership with us in the faith may be effective in deepening your understanding of every good thing we share for the sake of Christ. Your love has given me great joy and encouragement, because you, brother, have refreshed the hearts of the Lord's people.

It sounds like Philemon must be an encouraging believer to have around. Paul has certainly experienced him that way. Paul hears stories about Philemon's love for the saints, his love for believers, and his faith in Christ, but Paul stresses mostly Philemon's love for the Lord's people.

Philemon's love has given Paul great joy and encouragement, because Philemon refreshes the hearts of the Lord's people. And Paul's prayer for Philemon is for more of the same, that Philemon's partnership in the faith will increase his understanding of all the good things we share because of Christ.

There's no doubt that Paul has written his thanks for Philemon with the rest of the Letter in mind, because Paul is about to ask Philemon for more of the very same thing, which we'll see by the end.

The heart of the Letter: A Two-Pronged Message. Vv8-11, 12-16, 17-21

Therefore, although in Christ I have much confidence to command your obedience, yet I prefer to appeal to you on the basis of love. It is as none other than Paul—an old man, and now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus— that I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, who became my son while I was in chains. Formerly he was useless to you, but now he has become useful both to you and to me.

Vv12-16 - I am sending him—who is my very heart—back to you. I would have liked to keep him with me, so that he could take your place in helping me, while I am in chains for the gospel. But I did not want to do anything without your consent, so that any favor you do would not be forced, but would be voluntary. Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back forever— no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother. He is very dear to me but even dearer to you, both as a fellow man and as a brother in the Lord.

Vv17-21 - So if you consider me a partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. If he has done you any wrong or owes you anything, charge it to me. I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand. I will pay it back—not to mention that you owe me your very self. I do wish, brother, that I may have some benefit from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in Christ. Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I ask.

These are interesting paragraphs. It is obvious that Paul has a close relationship with Onesimus, and also that he has a close relationship with Philemon. We find out by the end that Philemon has a guest room where Paul hopes soon to be.

The Two Prongs

The strongest feature of these paragraphs is that Paul is giving Philemon two messages at once. One message (prong) is, “Philemon, I am Paul, and I have every right to tell you what to do, and to expect you to obey me, just because I said it. You would be out of line not to do what I tell you to do. The Lord supports this. And you owe me your very self, more than you could repay.”

The other message (prong) is: “Philemon, I will not do business that way. I appeal to your love for me and for Christ. I don’t want to force you, I want you to treat me as a brother, as a partner. You have refreshed others of the Lord’s people, and I hope you will refresh me, too. You are famous for loving the Lord’s people, and I hope you will show that for Onesimus and me, too.”

These two messages are both clear in each of the three paragraphs I read. Why does Paul write this way? We have been taught to be suspicious of someone who speaks like this. We don’t trust that at all. Something in us shouts out, “manipulation!”

If Paul only wanted to appeal to Philemon’s love as a brother and a partner, and Philemon’s reputation for doing good things because of Christ, why did Paul not leave it at that? Why did Paul keep reminding Philemon that he could be doing this more sternly than he’s doing it? Why does Paul keep reminding Philemon that he’s not using his rights?

Why does Paul keep telling Philemon that he has every right to insist on this, but he’s not going to, instead he’s going to appeal to Philemon’s love, and faith, and generosity, and helpfulness.

Why Two Prongs, Two Messages at Once?

The answer is simple: Paul wants Philemon to do for Onesimus the same thing that Paul is doing for Philemon. Philemon has every right to be stern and demanding with Onesimus, and Paul hopes Philemon will not do that.

Paul has every right to be stern and demanding with Philemon, but he will not do that. He chooses a kind and generous way of appealing to Philemon. Paul is modeling for Philemon how he wants Philemon to deal with Onesimus.

Paul wants Philemon to put aside his rights as a slave owner, and treat Onesimus a dear brother. Paul never says that in so many words. But he acted it out toward Philemon. Paul put aside his full rights as an aged apostle and an prisoner of Christ, and rather treated Philemon as a dear brother. He’s showing Philemon how this works.

And of course, the reason Paul can show this to Philemon is that Christ showed it to Paul. Christ had every right to be stern and demanding with Paul, and Philemon, and me, and you. But he has not treated us like that, and we know it. Paul modeled for Philemon the generosity Christ has shown all of us, and the generosity Paul hoped Philemon would show Onesimus.

Detour – Prisoner of Christ Jesus.

That is the core of this letter, the understanding the two messages Paul gives at once, and why he does it. But I will take you on a detour now. Twice in this letter, Paul calls himself “a prisoner of Christ Jesus.” Paul was in prison because authorities thought his preaching made him an enemy of Rome. But Paul does not call himself a prisoner of Rome. He’s a prisoner of Christ Jesus.

It is a real Roman prison. He speaks two times in this letter about his chains. In Acts 21 the soldiers bound him with two chains, one for hands, one for feet. In by the end of Acts 28, several years later, he still wears those chains, they never came off, ever. Real chains, a real prisoner, real years. Don’t spiritualize this. And he calls himself a prisoner of Christ Jesus.

In what sense is Paul a prisoner of Christ Jesus? Because Christ Jesus is Lord of heaven and earth, he is the Ruler of the kings of the earth (Rev 1), and he has full rights to Paul’s life. If Paul is in prison, Christ put him there. Paul does not enjoy prison. At the of Colossians, he asks for prayer very simply. Three words. “Remember my chains.”

But Christ is his Lord, and Christ is Lord of all, so if Paul is in prison, he’s a prisoner of Christ Jesus. And Christ Jesus was *not* in a hurry to get Paul out of prison. Could have done it overnight, as with Peter, and happened to Paul in the past. But not this time.

Not only that, Paul wears “prisoner of Christ Jesus” as a badge of honour. Christ entrusted Paul with this long term affliction, prisoner of Rome and free in Christ. For this he should have respect. He’s a prisoner of Christ Jesus, so pay attention to him.

What if we understood our most difficult affliction like this? “I’m a prisoner of Christ Jesus, I’m in Christ’s chains. I belong to Christ, this is his doing, he loves me greatly, enough to die for me, and this is how he wants it to be. He’s Lord of heaven and earth, and he has full rights to my life, and I trust him completely. I’m in chains, a prisoner of Christ Jesus.”

And now the detour is over, you have to leave that behind, which of course you cannot do, but you need to, and we will talk again about Paul the imprisoned apostle, and Philemon the believing slave owner, and Onesimus the escaped slave, holding this letter in his hands as he walks into Philemon’s house.

Two Prongs Review

In this letter, Paul reminds Philemon several times that he could command him to free Onesimus and send him back to Paul, in fact Paul didn’t need to send him back at all, but instead Paul appeals to Philemon as a brother and a partner, to show love to Paul in this way, as Philemon has shown love to other believers in the past.

And Paul keeps reminding Philemon that he could be stern and use his authority, but he chooses not to, because Philemon could be stern with Onesimus, and use his authority, but Paul hopes Philemon will choose not to, will choose rather to treat Onesimus as a brother, and treat Paul as a partner.

Rights are Legitimate

This Scripture does not erase Paul's rights as an elderly apostle, or Philemon's rights as a slave owner. I am not sure I like that, but that's how this reads. In this case, Paul does not think claiming his rights is the best way to act, in general he does not think it is the best way to act. But he does not believe the gospel throws out his rights, or Philemon's rights as a slave owner.

In 1 Cor 9 he says a couple of times, "Don't we have the right to this, as apostles and evangelists?" He and Barnabas do have rights, and Paul leaves no doubt about that. There also he chooses to set them aside, which he usually does, but not always.

So there is something delicate going on here. The gospel does not get rid of a person's authority, or forbid using it. It is not wrong. But in Philemon, and generally in the NT, it is not the best way for two believers to get along with each other. The best way is when we see each other as brothers and sisters who want to serve each other. But the gospel does not erase the basic rights.

What about Slavery?

Paul does not comment on slavery one way or the other. Neither did Jesus. They did not work to change the system. What they did do was undermine it. They made sure that we understood that before God we are all brothers and sisters. Paul was an apostle, Philemon one of his converts, and Onesimus was Philemon's slave. But in the Lord, all are brothers and sisters.

He told the Colossian church that Onesimus was "our faithful and dear brother." "Our" there is Paul and Timothy. Timothy was Paul's delegate, his messenger. But apostle Paul and delegate Timothy and escaped slave Onesimus are faithful and dear brothers to each other.

The Scripture does not attack slavery, the Scripture attacks the foundation. We are all sons of Adam and daughters of Eve. Where would we get the notion that we have the right to own another son of Adam or daughter of Eve, to treat them like property? It is preposterous. But the Bible does not cut down the tree of slavery, it rather poisons the roots of slavery.

Family and Partner Terms Explain the Relationship

The letter comes from Paul and Timothy *our brother*,
to Philemon *our fellow worker*,
and to Apphia *our sister*,
grace and peace from *God our Father*.

Philemon, I always thank God for *your partnership* with us, because you, *brother*, have refreshed the Lord's people.

Onesimus is now *a dear brother*,
a brother in the Lord.

So, Philemon, if you consider me *a partner*, welcome him as you would me.

I do wish, *brother*, to benefit from you.

Greetings from Epaphras, my *fellow prisoner*,
and from Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke, *my fellow workers*.

In this one letter, twelve instances of family or partner terms. That's who we are with each other. Paul never preached equality. He believed it, equality is true in the Bible, but not the important thing. We are a family of brothers and sisters, servants and partners who honour each other and take care of each other and work side by side.

Paul wants Philemon to treat him that way, and Paul hopes Philemon will treat Onesimus that way. Paul says to Philemon, "welcome Onesimus as you would welcome me."

That's quite a line. But in the new society, God's alternate society, the family of brothers and sisters whose head is Christ, among God's people, that how it shall be. The slave gets the same welcome as the apostle. And the Lord hopes we here will treat one another that way. Amen.

PRAYER: Father, show us where we fail in this. We think we're not doing too bad, but we've been wrong before. We don't see ourselves well. Lead us to live this more and more with all of your people, and to treat everyone we meet like this as well.

And Father, the One Great Father who is over all, and through all, and in all, thank you for showing us how to live together. Thank you for this letter to Philemon that gives us a more personal glimpse into your family, a close up fragrance of life among your God. It is very good. Thank you for your Spirit who calls us and helps us in this again and again. Amen.

(response time)

BENEDICTION: May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all. Amen. Go in God's peace, to love and serve the Lord.