

# Onesimus and Philemon, Beloved Brothers

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[ 0 : 00 ] Friends, this is, as Jeff said at the beginning, a Sunday we've affectionately come to refer to as Launch Sunday.! The first Sunday of our fall semester, our programming gets up and running. ! It lays dormant to some degree during the summer, and then we resume a lot of it in the fall. And one of the things that we do every time this year is to take a little time to remind ourselves about the core of who we are and why we're here.

What is the heart of Church of the Advent? What is that heartbeat, and what drives all of these ministries and efforts that we partake in? And the answer is simple.

The heartbeat of Church of the Advent is the gospel. And it is our fundamental belief that the gospel changes everything. And so that's what we're going to talk about this morning, how the gospel changes everything.

We don't just believe it intellectually, we see it at work. And the way we're going to do that is by looking at the book that we call Philemon. And this is a letter that Paul wrote.

[ 1 : 04 ] It's his shortest letter, just 25 verses, and yet I would argue it may be the most powerful. Absolutely the most powerful. It's a letter that Paul wrote to a man named Philemon concerning a runaway slave.

And it's a case study that shows us the power of the gospel to work and to bring change and transformation. So what I'm going to do this morning is spend a little time giving you the context, the back story of Philemon.

And then we're going to see how the gospel is at work in this letter. How it changes us personally. So personal transformation. How it changes things socially.

Changes our relationships. So social transformation. And then finally how it changes the world. Cultural transformation. So personal transformation. Social transformation. And then cultural transformation.

Let's pray. Our Lord and Heavenly Father, we thank you that we don't even have to invite you to be here. You are here. We're actually here at your invitation.

[ 2 : 08 ] And Lord, we pray that by the power of your Holy Spirit, our hearts would be opened. Our minds would be opened. That whatever you have for us this morning, you would prepare us to receive.

Because that is our greatest need, whether we know it or not. We need to hear your voice. We need to encounter your living word, Jesus Christ. It's in his name that we ask this of you.

Amen. So first, let me give you a little context. A lot of people aren't very familiar with Philemon and the back story here. But Philemon appears to have been a wealthy Roman citizen.

And he's living in Colossae. And he owned slaves. Everybody in the first century Greco-Roman world who could owned slaves. It was normal.

It was accepted. In some ways, it was different from the transatlantic slave trade. Slave wasn't based on race. Anybody from any race or ethnicity could be a slave.

[ 3 : 04 ] Some were educated and held important positions. And some had the opportunity to purchase their freedom. And so there were some differences. However, there were some similarities.

Slaves were, at the end of the day, someone's property. And many of them faced harsh conditions. They could face abuse. They could face all kinds of mistreatment.

Sexual exploitation. One of Philemon's slaves, Onesimus, runs away. And we can tell from the context that he steals something from Onesimus on his way out.

So he adds insult to injury. And he runs away. And then eventually, Onesimus, in God's providence, meets the apostle Paul. And through that relationship, Paul tells Onesimus about Jesus.

He becomes a follower of Jesus. He serves with Paul. It says that he becomes like a son to Paul. And Paul becomes like a father to him. So they develop a deep, loving, intimate relationship. [ 4 : 06 ] Paul refers to him as his own heart. When I send him to you, I send my own heart. So they become very close. But then Paul does the unthinkable. Paul decides to send Onesimus back.

Back to Colossae. Back to face Philemon. This master that he had escaped from. Paul decides to send him back. And it begs the question, why? Why wouldn't Paul shelter him and say, stay here. We'll take care of you. You never have to go back there. The answer, I believe, when we look at the letter, is that Paul believes, more than anything else, in the power of the gospel to transform people and relationships.

And so it's because of his faith in the gospel that he sends Onesimus back. And so Paul writes two letters. The first letter is a letter we're very familiar with.

The letter we refer to as Colossians. So he writes a letter to the Colossian church. And then he writes another letter to go along with that letter. This little letter that we refer to as Philemon.

[ 5 : 12 ] And then he entrusts these letters to Tychicus and Onesimus, which we see in Colossians chapter 4. And then he sends those two men on their way, carrying these letters back to the church in Colossae.

And we need to understand, this is the background of the letter. But one thing is clear. Onesimus is risking everything by going back. He's risking everything by delivering this letter.

Because he knows he's going to have to face Philemon. Under Roman law, he could face being whipped. Under Roman law, he could face being branded on his face to shame and humiliate him as a runaway.

He could even face execution. His only hope is for the gospel to change Philemon's heart. So it begs the question, what does Paul actually write to Philemon?

And that's what we're going to look at in more detail. First, Paul reminds Philemon how the gospel has transformed him personally. Personal transformation.

[ 6 : 13 ] So we look at verse 4. I thank my God always when I, Paul, remember you, Philemon, 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.

This turns out Philemon is a Christian. Not only is he a Christian, the Colossian church was most likely a network of several house churches.

And we can see from Paul's greeting that Philemon actually hosts one of those house churches in his home. So he's not only a Christian, he's a leader in the church and hosts the church in his home.

And in verse 5, Paul says, I could command you to forgive Onesimus. I could command you. I have that right.

But for love's sake, I prefer to appeal to you. And then in verse 14, he says that he wants Philemon to do the right thing, not under compulsion, but of his own accord.

[ 7 : 17 ] So what's he saying here? Paul believes that because Philemon is a Christian, he will be motivated to forgive Onesimus out of love.

He says that I shouldn't have to command you. Because you're a Christian, you should be motivated to do this out of love. Now what difference does it make that Philemon is a Christian? What difference does it make when someone is a Christian? What's the thing that sets Christians apart from other people at the end of the day? It's not their goodness.

In fact, if I'm honest and if you're honest, we can probably think of people in our lives who are from other religious backgrounds or maybe secular people who objectively, if you're looking by most people's standards, they live good lives.

In fact, maybe they're better people than a lot of the Christians we know. So it's not their goodness. It's not their politics. We know just from the makeup of our church that there are good and faithful Christians on both sides of the aisle.

[ 8 : 16 ] So what is it that makes Christians different? The thing that sets Christians apart is that they know deep down that even though they don't deserve it, God has forgiven them.

They've been forgiven by God. At some point in their lives, they came to God and they asked God for forgiveness on the basis of what Jesus had accomplished on the cross.

And in response, God has loved mercy, poured love and mercy and grace into their lives. And people who have experienced that come to realize that God's mercy knows no bounds.

God's love is immeasurable. You may have heard it put this way, that if you were to take all the sin of the world, all of the sin, all of the atrocities, all the worst evil, and you were to draw all of it together, it would be like a drop compared to the ocean of God's mercy and love.

There is no comparison. And that drop would immediately be swallowed up by God's limitless mercy. So a Christian is someone who knows this.

[ 9 : 36 ] And that completely changes us. When you begin to taste of that ocean of love and mercy, it changes everything. Because apart from God's mercy, people have to deal with shame.

And we have to deal with guilt. And some of us have to deal with deep self-hatred. With internalized messages that we've received, some of us from very early ages. That tell us we're not good enough, that we're insufficient, that we're disgusting, that we're tainted.

People have to spend our lives looking for affirmation and looking for approval and trying to get attention and trying to find acceptance and belonging and meaning.

We have to strive after these things. Not so for the Christian. Not so. No more shame. No more condemnation.

No more chasing after those things. Only love. Only radical acceptance. A God who knows everything about you.

[ 10 : 41 ] And loves everything about you. And if you're a Christian and you're hearing this and you're thinking, well, that's not how I feel. I still struggle with guilt and shame and self-hatred.

Or I still chase after these things. Let's be clear. That's not because the gospel isn't true. That's because sometimes we live like the gospel isn't true.

And we need to be reminded because we forget. By the way, this is why we value and prioritize gathering together as a church body. This is why we try to find good Christian friends.

This is why we spend time reading scripture and praying. Because we need to be reminded again and again and again and again of what is true. But all of this gives rise to one very important truth when it comes to Philemon.

Here's what that truth is. Because Christians have been forgiven completely and embraced by God, Christians then have the ability to forgive every wrong committed against them.

[ 11 : 48 ] Christians have the ability to love everyone, even their enemies. It's like the Christian superpower. It really is. Christians have this unique power where we can forgive and love anyone in the world.

Think about it. Why do we carry grudges? What are grudges all about? See, the reason people carry grudges has to do with our identity. Grudges are rooted in an identity that says fundamentally deep down, I am someone who was wronged.

We allow the wrong, we allow the anger to define us. And that's why we carry the grudge. But the gospel changes our identity.

We come to a place where we no longer define ourselves by the wrongs committed against us. We begin to define ourselves by the mercy that God has shown us.

We know that whatever wrongs may have been committed against us, they're nothing compared to the wrongs that we committed against God by denying him, living as though he doesn't exist.

[ 13 : 02 ] And so at our core, a Christian says, I am fundamentally deep down someone who has been forgiven and loved and restored.

And when that happens, what you find is that resentment no longer flows out of you. Instead, forgiveness begins to flow out of you.

Let's put it another way, and if you're going to write anything down, write this down. Christians no longer treat people the way we think they deserve to be treated.

Christians treat people the way Christ has treated us. It's a completely different way of seeing and relating to other people. It has nothing to do with what we think people deserve.

It has everything to do with how Christ has treated us. This is why Paul says in verse 18, by the way, if Onesimus has wronged you at all or owes you anything, charge it to my account.

[ 14 : 05 ] Paul's saying, that's exactly what Jesus did for me. Jesus stood before the Father and said, whatever Paul has done in all of his days of rebelling against you and persecuting your followers, Jesus said, charge that to my account.

Paul's merely doing the same thing. In this relationship. So at the most basic level, the gospel changes us personally. It gives us a new identity as people who have been forgiven.

And it gives us the capacity to forgive. But the gospel doesn't stop at personal transformation. It flows outward into and changes our relationships with the people around us.

And this is where we see social transformation. In verses 15 and 16, Paul says something extraordinary. Listen to this. Verse 15. He says this to Philemon.

For this perhaps is why Onesimus was parted from you for a while. That you might have him back forever. No longer as a bondservant, but more than a bondservant, as a beloved brother.

[15:11] Here's what he's saying. When Onesimus ran away, he wasn't a Christian. But now he has come to faith. And Paul is saying now that he's come to faith, it all makes sense.

Maybe this was God's plan all along. God's desire was all along to transform your relationship with him. God's desire ultimately is that you would no longer be a master and a slave.

God wants to take him away from you so that he can give him back to you, but no longer as a slave, as a beloved brother. The reason Paul assumes this is because that is what the gospel does.

It gives us to one another, right? It transforms our relationships with other believers. It takes individuals from different social classes with different levels of status and authority.

And it joins them together as a family. See, we have to understand that as a Jewish man living in a Greco-Roman world, Paul was immersed in a culture with deeply distorted ideas about ethnicity, class, and gender.

[16:24] It was a very hierarchical society with very clear social ladders, very clear lines of power and dominance.

So Gentiles, right, the Jews, Paul was Jewish, the Jews refused to even associate with Gentiles. They referred to them as unclean dogs. When it comes to slaves and women, Aristotle had a massive influence over the Greco-Roman world that has extended all the way into the later medieval period.

He taught that slavery was natural. He taught that some people are born marked for subjugation. He referred to slaves as living tools.

It's like a tool with a soul. And so he reasoned that just as things like friendship or justice are impossible between a craftsman and a tool, so they would be impossible between a master and a slave.

Simply a tool with a heartbeat. Aristotle had similar things to say about women. He taught there's a natural hierarchy. He taught that men are meant to rule.

[17:44] And he said that men are more naturally suited to rule because of their superior access to their rational capacity. And he taught that women are meant to submit, serve, and obey.

That that is where a woman finds her purpose and finds her virtue. And so he similarly taught that true friendship is not possible between men and women because women were inherently inferior to men.

And friendship, he says, is only possible between equals. True friendship. So not surprisingly, in Paul's culture, it was very common for Jewish men to pray this prayer.

Blessed be God that he did not make me a Gentile. Blessed be God that he did not make me a slave. Blessed be God that he did not make me a woman. But we have to understand, the gospel changes everything.

It changes everything. In Galatians 3, Paul writes, for as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. What does that mean? Well, there is neither Jew nor Greek.

[18:48] There is neither slave nor free. There is no male and female. For you are all one in Christ Jesus. It would be impossible to overstate how radical this was sounded in the first century context.

Because all of those relationships in the first century were relationships that were defined by dominance and status. One over the other. And so what Paul is saying is that the gospel comes in.

And when the gospel takes hold, you see dominance hierarchies turned upside down. You see power dynamics done away with. The entire social structure is remapped according to Christ.

So Paul's argument to Philemon is this. He says, Philemon, when you became a Christian, Christ joined you to all other Christians throughout the world and across history.

By the way, in the beginning of the letter, when he refers to the sharing of Philemon's faith, he's not talking about evangelism. We see that and we think of that as sharing our faith in terms of evangelism. He's using the word, the koinonia of your faith.

[19:52] So when he refers to the sharing of your faith, he's referring to the fact that as a Christian, Philemon has entered into a mutually interdependent relationship with all other Christians.

You now share in the faith of all Christians. And he's praying that Philemon fully and completely understands the implications of that for his relationship with his former slave.

It changes everything. So he says, when you became a Christian, everyone, all the other Christians, they became your brothers, Philemon. They became your sisters.

They became your fathers and mothers. They became your sons and daughters. Everything is different now because of Christ. And so his point to Philemon is this. So when it comes to how we treat other Christians, we cannot be selective.

That's why he says in verse 17, so if you consider me, Paul, your partner, receive him, Onesimus, as you would me. He's saying, Philemon, this doesn't just apply to people we like.

[ 21 : 01 ] It doesn't just apply to people who occupy the same place on the social ladder as you. It doesn't just apply to the people that we agree with politically or theologically.

It doesn't just apply to people who look like us or dress like us or act like us. He's essentially saying this, what he says elsewhere. There is no place for favoritism in God's kingdom.

So here's how this is working. So far, we've seen the power of the gospel to bring personal transformation. And then it flows out of individuals into our relationships.

And it begins to redefine our relationships. But there still remains one massive looming question that we have yet to answer. Why, oh why, doesn't Paul directly attack the institution of slavery itself?

That's what I want when I read this. It's what most people these days want when they read it. And the answer is, he does.

[ 22 : 08 ] But not in the way we might expect. This brings us to the third point, cultural transformation. Verse 2, we see something very important. Paul's greeting includes the church.

So this isn't just a private letter to Philemon, read this and then crumble it up and throw it away. This is a letter that he intended to have read publicly to the whole church. So you can imagine the scene, right?

There's Philemon, the host of the church. Everybody's gathered together. They're standing up to read this letter. And there's Onesimus, standing right there, right? So as this letter is being read, everybody's looking at Onesimus.

And everybody's looking at Philemon. And everybody's looking at Onesimus. And they're like, what's going to happen, right? It's amazing when you think of the relationship, by the way, between Colossians and Philemon.

In many ways, the themes of Colossians resonate deeply with Philemon. And we can think of Philemon as a kind of case study application of everything that Paul talks about in his letter to the Colossians.

[ 23 : 10 ] Incredible to see that connection. So Paul intends for these letters both to be read to the church. And in doing so, make no mistake, he is challenging not just Philemon, but the church.

He's calling the church to become a living preview of things to come. He's saying, just as I'm calling Philemon to do this in his relationship, I'm calling all of you to do this in all of your relationships.

What is the church called to do? Paul would say, I believe, the church is called to offer to the watching world a preview. To offer to the watching world a vision of a reality in which social structures that are opposed to the gospel are replaced by relationships of love and mutuality.

At every level of human relationship. When people come to this gathering, they should see something fundamentally different.

This is why Rodney Stark, the historical sociologist, says, Of all the world's religions, including the three great monotheisms, only in Christianity did the idea develop that slavery was sinful and must be abolished.

[ 24 : 28 ] Paul planted a seed. He planted a seed. And that would eventually come to subvert and overturn the entire institution of slavery.

But guess what? It took centuries for that to happen. It took centuries for that to unfold. Down the sidewalk from our house, if we walk down a couple of blocks, there's a place where the sidewalk has been completely busted apart.

Because a tree has grown up right through the sidewalk. And it's a big, massive, beautiful tree. And every time I see that, I think about the fact that at one time, that was just a seed.

And it was in the ground, and it was under where they laid that concrete. And at the time, that tiny little seed compared to that massive block of concrete, the suggestion that that seed would ever

break that concrete, much less even make a dent in it, would seem ludicrous.

There's no possible way. Far too strong. But then the years passed. Year after year after year, and that seed took root, and that seed grew. And now that concrete that at one time seemed utterly impervious has been reduced to rubble.

[ 25 : 49 ] And the tree stands strong and beautiful and firm. Across the centuries, we have seen the fact that Paul planted a seed.

And at the time, Christians made up a tiny fraction of a percentage of the population. They had no influence. They had no notoriety. But then that seed grew.

And it grew over centuries. And across the centuries, if we look here and there, we begin to see Christians questioning and challenging the institution of slavery.

They're looking at the scriptures, and they're looking at the culture around them, and they're starting to ask really hard, penetrating questions about the realities that they have up to this point taken for granted.

All right, so Gregory of Nyssa, St. Bethel, Aquinas, and then an increasing number of popes. Here and there, then more and more, and then more and more.

[ 26 : 49 ] But it took centuries. It took over 1,800 years for Christians to finally come to the place where they would organize en masse against the institution of slavery itself.

To abolish and do away with it. And guess what? The battle against slavery is still ongoing to this day. And some of you know this because that's what you do. But it took that long.

So the point I'm trying to make is this. The gospel planted seeds meant to radically transform all of our social structures.

And that is meant to begin in and be led by the church. It's meant to begin in and be led by the church.

The church is meant to be a living preview of the new creation. Where all people are joined together as one. Where God has reconciled the world to himself.

[ 27 : 47 ] Where we live as one great family and radiate the glory of Christ. That's meant to begin here. And I would say that based on everything that Paul says in Galatians chapter 3.

This is not only something that applies to slavery. It also applies to the way we think about race. And ethnicity. And I believe it applies to the way we think about and understand gender roles. So let's apply this with a few minutes that we have left. Personal transformation. The gospel transforms us into people of mercy and love.

I believe that there are some of us here who are carrying grudges. Who are withholding forgiveness. For various reasons. And I would say that, and maybe you agree.

Carrying a grudge around is kind of like dragging a bag of solidified waste everywhere you go. It weighs you down. It wears you down.

[ 28 : 53 ] The only person hurt by it is you. And I think some of us in this room may have grievances or grudges that we need to let go of. We have people that we need to forgive.

And you can do that even if those people are long gone. Even if they've passed away. But here's the thing. If the gospel is true. Then we have not only the ability to forgive.

But we have the imperative. And that's something that we can do right now. Number two, the gospel transforms our relationships. Social transformation.

Our faith is not just private devotion to God. We live our faith out every day in the way we relate to and view other people. Especially other Christians.

So let me ask you this. Are there other Christians in your life that you tend to look down on? Maybe because of political differences. Maybe because of theological disagreements.

[ 29 : 53 ] Are there other Christians on the other hand you feel inferior to? Are there Christians that you're intimidated by? Or you crave their approval because you see them as being so much better than you.

So much further along than you. I would say either one of those things, either way, is a denial of the gospel. That person is your brother.

That person is your sister. That person is your sister. And then finally, the gospel transforms the world. Cultural transformation. We cannot emphasize enough that the church is called to be a preview of the new creation.

In this world, you may find status hierarchies. And social ladders. And power dynamics. And people like Aristotle may win the day.

But in the church, we are called to be something completely different. We are called to be a reflection of the way things will be when Jesus comes again.

[ 30 : 58 ] But we have to be brutally honest about the fact that history shows us there's still a lot of work to be done. The church is still working this out. We are still working out.

Where are we still holding on to culturally bound assumptions? And where are we leaning into and following the gospel and the authority of scripture?

And where do those things overlap? And where do those things depart? And it is not simple. And it is not straightforward. And it requires an enormous amount of work. It takes a long time.

It takes generations. It takes a continual willingness to check our assumptions against the witness of scripture. And it takes an enormous amount of grace and humility all around.

Because we are continually having to do this work until Christ comes again. And just speaking honestly as your pastor, as just another follower of Jesus alongside you, this is one of the reasons that I have wrestled so much with the question of women's roles in the church.

[ 32 : 06 ] It's not the only reason, but it's one reason. And I have to be honest about that. Now that goes beyond the scope of this sermon. But if you want to dig into that more, come next week to the adult education hour starting at 9 a.m.

And for the next few weeks after that, we're going to be digging into that topic specifically. Let's pray. Our Father, we thank you for your word.

And we thank you ultimately that, Lord, we are reliant not on our ability to figure every tiny little thing out here and now. But we're here because of your grace.

We're here because you love us. And we trust that you are working to bring this kind of renewal and restoration in us personally. And I pray for those of us in whose lives you're at work right now.

To our relationships, Lord, I pray that you would continue to transform our relationships. Continue to help us let go of grudges to do the hard work of forgiveness and reconciliation where needed.

[ 33 : 08 ] That you would change the way we see one another when it comes to power and status, Lord. That you would make us truly into the family that you desire us to be. And, Lord, I pray that you would continue to work in us.

That we might put something different on display. That we might live lives in this community that provoke questions only the gospel can answer. And we pray this in the name of Jesus. Amen.