The Power of Love

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Preacher: James Ross

[0:00] Now, if you can find the letter of Philemon, if you're using a church Bible, it's on page 1200, a very little letter with some really significant lessons. It's there before the book of Hebrews. It's after Timothy and Titus. While you're looking it up, it's a letter most likely written by Paul while he was under house arrest in the city of Rome. He writes it to his friend Philemon in the city of Colossae. He's a follower of Jesus. He's a house church leader.

And the other key figure that we meet in this letter is Onesimus, his runaway slave. We're going to spend a few weeks together on this wonderful little letter. Let me read it all for us now.
Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy, our brother. To Philemon, our dear friend and fellow worker. Also to Aphia, our sister, and Archippus, our fellow soldier. And to the church that meets in your home. Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. 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. Therefore, although in Christ I could be bold and order you to do what you ought to do, 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.
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 seem forced, but would be voluntary.
[2:28] 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. 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. And one more thing, prepare a guest room for me, because I hope to be restored to you in answer to your prayers. Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends you greetings. And so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke, my fellow workers.
The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Amen. So we're thinking this morning about the power of love as we see it in this letter. But before we get to the letter, let me take you to another document. It's a document called Where Do We Go From Here? It was a speech turned into a book delivered by Martin Luther King in Atlanta, Georgia in 1967. This document, the speech, begins with a record of progress of black rights, largely accomplished through the influence of black churches in America after desegregation. But then he asks towards the middle of this speech, where do we go from here? And Martin Luther King said this, I have decided to stick with love. For I know that love is ultimately the only answer to humankind's problems. I'm not talking about emotional bosh when I talk about love. I'm talking about a strong, demanding love. God is love.
He who hates does not know God, but he who loves has the key that unlocks the door to the meaning of ultimate reality. Martin Luther King, as one who knew the gospel, could speak with profound truth of the reality that love is the only force capable of turning an enemy into a friend. And

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we're thinking about a particular kind of love, God's gospel love here that dominates the letter of Philemon. But we're going to see it's a strong and demanding love, because Philemon is going to be told to pursue costly reconciliation. We're going to be told of a love that literally unlocks the door, because Philemon is told to welcome a runaway thief as a brother in Christ. We encounter in the gospel love with transforming power, a power great enough to turn Onesimus from being God's enemy to being his friend and his child.
So we're going to think about the impact of this love in the gospel on the vertical level, but we're also going to recognize the power that there is to bring Philemon to show mercy and kindness to Onesimus, despite the fact he's been dishonored and he's been robbed. And we're going to see the power of the gospel on a horizontal level as it applies to the work of reconciliation. So it's a short letter, but it packs a punch. And especially this week, we're going to recognize it as a lot to teach us about love. Just a little bit more by way of introduction, it's written by the Apostle Paul.
[6:33] Interestingly, it becomes clear that he has brought them both to faith by his teaching. So he made that point to Philemon in verse 19 when he says, not to mention that you owe me your very self. What's he saying there? He's saying, it's because of me, Philemon, that you have life in the Lord Jesus.

But he also brought Onesimus to faith. He calls him my child, my son. That's the language Paul uses of those he has converted personally. Why is this letter written? We can think about it as a family letter about a serious family matter. They are now brothers in Christ, and there needs to be reconciliation. They've been united in the Lord Jesus by faith, and now they need to put that unity into action. For Onesimus, this runaway, this prodigal, he needs to return home. He needs to face up to what he's done. He needs to face Philemon and put things right. And for Philemon, this house church leader, he must lead with grace. He must welcome and honor Onesimus in Christ.
These are not natural responses, are they? The natural responses we might expect are, on the one hand, justice, he has wronged me, or distance. I'm not going back to put things right.
But Paul invites them to choose a third way, to choose the way of love, a way that demonstrates mercy and peace and forgiveness and honor, something that is radically different, more demanding and more beautiful. We're going to think about two aspects of the power of love.
First, the power of love in salvation, and then the power of love in reconciliation. Let's begin with the power of love in salvation. We're going to think about what happens to Onesimus.
[8:40] I think to understand what happens to Onesimus, a little bit of social background is helpful, because he is a slave. There's a professor of church history and New Testament called N.T. Wright.

He compares slavery within the Roman Empire to electricity and technology today in the sense that it powered the growth of the empire. Somewhere between 25 to 30 percent of everybody who lived within the Roman Empire was a slave of some kind or another. And so perhaps it's not a surprise that there's a professor by the name of Keith Bradley, who's done a lot of work to identify relations and attitudes between slaves and their owners, and he spoke a lot about dislike and distrust.
And so he's discovered evidence of daily resistance from slaves to their masters, maybe stealing goods and property, and maybe causing minor damage or inconvenience, maybe just working really slowly as a way to fight the system and to show resistance. It was very uncommon for a slave to do what Onesimus did. It was considered a very high-risk move. If a slave was caught as a runaway, crucifixion was not uncommon. Putting on display, this is what happens.
Think then about what's happening in Onesimus' story. In verse 11, we're told that formerly he was useless, but now he's useful. The name Onesimus was a name given to slaves. It means useful. It was a hopeful title. If I take this person as a slave, I hope they'll be useful to me.
But he's proven not to be useful. He's proven to be useless. And in fact, in verse 18, we discover most likely he's gone on the run having stolen property. If he's done you any wrong or owes you anything, charge it to me. Okay, so he's left Philemon. He's taken some property, probably to fund his journey of some thousand miles to the city of Rome. Let's get safe distance between me and Philemon. The story reads in some ways like the prodigal son's story we encounter from Jesus in Luke 15. Here is another who has dishonored the head of the house. Here is another who has valued stuff more than showing honor to the head of the house. He's left home, and now he's found himself in a really desperate situation. Well, his next stop, Onesimus' next stop, takes him to Rome. We're not told why he goes to Rome, and we're not told either how does he come to encounter Paul, who's under house arrest. It's the kind of detail we love to know. Did he come there because of desperation? Has he heard from Philemon some good things about Paul? And he thinks, here is

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someone who might show me mercy.
[11:46] Here's the kind of person who might help me. Or is it another wonderful example within the Bible of the long arm of God's providence, that God is directing Onesimus' steps, so he just happens upon Paul. If you know the film Casablanca, of all the prison cells in all the towns in all the world, he just walks into mine. We don't know how it comes to be, but we do know God is working.

He's showing love to a desperate, runaway rebel. Before we think about what happens when Paul meets him in his house arrest, Onesimus shows us something interesting, I think, about his life that maybe connects with our own. Because on the one hand, we look at Onesimus' story, and we think, here's a guy who's run away, and he's a thief. You know, he's a rebel. He's made a wreck of his life. He's that kind of person. But we also need to understand that living in Philemon's house, where Philemon was a house church leader, according to verse 2, he is going to be hearing God's Word, read and preached. He's going to be hearing the gospel. So he's someone who's been under the influence of the Christian faith, and he's turned his back on it. So when we think about Onesimus, he is both a rebellious person, and he's both, at the same time, a religious person. And the wonderful thing is that grace comes to him. God's love comes to him and saves him, and that says something to us.
Whether we're here today and we're a rebellious person, wandered away from God, we feel like we've made a mess of our lives even today. Or whether we come as a very religious person. We've always come. It's our habit, but as yet we're resistant. The story of Onesimus says there is grace, there is love from God for us today. Well, in Paul's cell, what happens with Onesimus? Onesimus comes to hear the gospel. Because, of course, for Paul, this is always going to be priority number one. And so he takes time to share the gospel with Onesimus of Jesus, the Son of God, willingly humbling himself to become the suffering servant. Willingly dying on the cross to save sinners, that they might be forgiven and be brought to know God's love. Sharing with Onesimus that Jesus is like the father in the story of the prodigal son. He is the one who is willing to forgive the debt. He is the one who is glad to welcome and to honor and to restore. Jesus has joy when sinners come to him. Paul shared the gospel, and Onesimus believed. And so Onesimus comes to discover the transforming power of God's love in his own life. Paul plays on his name in verse 11. He was useless, but now he's become useful.
For Paul, he's become really useful. As he's become a follower of Jesus, he's been able to help him in gospel work. Paul's ability to move around is limited. Onesimus is not. But he's also useful to Philemon. He's a brother in Christ.
[15:15] He's got a new heart ready to serve. Look at verse 16. He was a slave, but he's been transformed.

Now he is a dear brother, a brother in the Lord. There's vital unity connected because they're united in the Lord Jesus. Because of the work of salvation, Paul can write to Philemon, and say, look at the dignity that you should see in Philemon. He is a fellow man. He has value as an image bearer. But more than that, he has a new status in God's family, a brother in the Lord.
And so the love of God in the gospel is a force capable to turn an enemy into a friend, to turn an enemy of God into a friend of God. So that when Paul writes of him in verse 12, writes of Onesimus, I am sending him who is my very heart back to you. We get a sense of that deep love that Paul has for Onesimus, this runaway who's come to faith.
Paul represents Jesus, reveals the love of God to Onesimus. And as we think of Paul's example, we say, how much more Jesus would say of Onesimus, and Jesus says of every one of his children here today, he, she is my very heart. My joy is bound to them. For Philemon, my joy is bound to Onesimus, so he must be in my household, so you must welcome him. I wonder, do we know, are we experiencing this transforming power in our own lives? I came across the research of a neuroscientist this week.
After 20 years of research, wrote a book, wrote a paper entitled Wired for Love. After 20 years of research, concluding, love is a biological necessity. We need it for our well-being. We need, we need food, we need water, we need exercise, and we need love. How did she discover this? Well, over these 20 years, various subjects were brought in, and they were shown photos of their loved ones versus, or photos of, sort of, friends or acquaintances or strangers. And as the photos were shown, she was capturing MRI, images of the brain. And what the scientists came to discover was that the part of the brain that would fire up was the part that controls our basic needs. And the more closely a person was related, the more love that was shared, the more brain activity there was. And

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so she concluded that we are wired for love.
[18:36] It is basic to us. The Bible tells us that, that we are made for community, we are made for society, but more than that, we are wired to know and to enjoy the love of God as it's found in Christ Jesus.

And when we find that love, and when that love captures our hearts, it transforms everything, like it did for Onesimus. When we come to believe that the Lord Jesus, the King of Glory, gladly left His throne to walk a road of unbelievable suffering, to pick up His cross, to suffer and die for you and me, to save us, to change us. Well, instead of running from Him, we run to Him, to let His love change us. And that's the power of love in salvation.
But that's not the only demonstration of love we have in this letter, in this story. We also need to think about the power of love in reconciliation. To read this letter, we understand this is a really personal letter. Some of Paul's letters are written to whole churches. This is written to one man. This is written to Philemon. And it overflows with love. See how he describes Philemon. Verse 1, he is our dear friend. Verse 4 to 7, we have this great sense of thankfulness that Paul has for Philemon as he remembers him in his prayers. Why? Because what's evident in Philemon's life is that he loves Jesus and he loves the people of Jesus. He has deep joy because Philemon, he's like a fountain.
The source of the water source is God's love poured out to Philemon and Jesus. And then Philemon is refreshing others as he's sharing that love with the church and those beyond.
[20:43] And so he's profoundly thankful as he sees that in Philemon. And because he knows he's a follower of Jesus, he calls him to this strong, demanding gospel love. To follow Jesus, his master. To count the cost.

To make sacrifices to restore a rebel and a runaway. Picture of the gospel. Because, of course, reconciliation is one aspect of the gospel. We heard 2 Corinthians 5. Paul will write to a different church, a church in Corinth, making the point that God has reconciled himself to the world by forgiving sin through the finished work of the Lord Jesus on the cross. And then he calls his people to become agents of reconciliation. That we have this good news of this great exchange that has taken place. That Jesus has taken my sin and he's died as if he were a sinner. And he's credited to me his righteousness. So I am considered righteous by my Father. This is the good news. There's reconciliation.
It happens in the gospel. And now it needs to be worked out on the ground in the lives of these two brothers in Christ. That reconciling love has the power within it to reconcile a master and a slave. As they are united to Christ who paid the ultimate cost. And in him there is the power to pursue this reconciliation when it is hard. And it is hard.
The request for reconciliation that we see here has three aspects to it. Let's think first of all about love. How is he to think about Onesimus now? Think of him 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. He is not ever to be thought of as property because he's precious to Christ. He is a fellow man.
[23:19] He is loved in the Lord. And so Philemon is to extend the love of Christ to him regardless of his betrayal. Will. Verse 17, this reconciliation requires a welcome.

If you consider me a partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. Now we know that Philemon loves Paul. In fact, in verse 22, Paul will say, prepare a guest room for me. He's already known what it is to be welcomed by Philemon. And so he says to Philemon, however you would prepare to welcome me and honor me, welcome Onesimus like that. That slave that robbed you and ran away, welcome him, honor him, treat him like the prodigal son, and show him grace.
And ultimately, he wants Philemon to release Onesimus. Verse 20, 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. So here's what's happening. Paul has found Onesimus really helpful in his gospel ministry while he's in prison. In verse 14, he makes it clear that he would love to keep him, but he's not going to force Philemon to do that. So he's sending Onesimus back, but at the same time, he is confident in Philemon that his love for Jesus, his love for Paul, his love for God's mission will enable him to not just welcome Onesimus back, but to release him for gospel ministry.
Now you think about the impact of the gospel in this one little household for a moment. It has turned a useless person to a useful person. He'd been a crook, but now Onesimus is functioning as a

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Christian missionary. He'd been a prodigal, a rebel, but now he's a partner in the gospel. And now he's supposed to be welcomed back with open arms and sent away gladly. Sounds amazing. And I think we can presume it was successful, that this is exactly what happened, or we wouldn't still have the letter. So it sounds wonderful, but we need to stop, don't we, and realize just how difficult this is, how unnatural this is.
[26:20] Without the work of God and the power of his love, this is not happening. It's a really hard thing in the first place for Onesimus to do, because Paul is saying, listen, you've been really faithful in gospel ministry here, but you need to return to the household, to the master that you treated so badly. You need to be humble to do that.

And he needed to trust. He needed to trust that Paul's letter, this little letter here, the power of the gospel, would mean he'd be shown mercy and not justice and perhaps lose his life.
It's really hard for Philemon to, you know, picture the moment when Onesimus comes back, and he's got the letter in his hand, and he's got his cap in hand. He is this man who has refused to serve well. He is this one who has robbed him and ran. He has dishonored Philemon within the household and within the wider community. The law shouts for justice. The gospel speaks of mercy and a welcome.
In the prodigal son's story, there was, of course, an older brother. And often we can relate to the older brother. Imagine Philemon. How can I welcome the like of him?
How can I throw wide the door and throw open my arms and throw a feast for this guy? He's worthless. Reminds us that gospel love is demanding.
[28:02] When a relationship goes wrong in our household, within our family, when someone in the church wrongs us, it's demanding to show gospel of natural instinct. Maybe it's anger. Maybe it's to show someone the cold shoulder. Maybe it's to seek to apply strict justice in the matter.

Paul shows that gospel instinct. Do we want the best for the other? We want restoration. We're willing to pursue reconciliation, even as we know it's a hard road. Think about it in our own stories. Maybe this is part of your story. You've had this experience. How can we do it? Why should we do it?
Because of the gospel. Because of the gospel of reconciliation. Because God made Jesus, who had no sin, to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. Because Jesus, in love, gave up everything to reconcile us to God. We ought to follow his example. Because while we we're still enemies, Christ died for us, because God's love shown to us at the cross has made peace between us and God. It's because of God's grace we are called and we are empowered to put gospel love into action. To be ready to practice forgiveness. To be ready to practice mercy. To be ready to welcome home and seek restoration. God's love truly is the only power capable of turning enemies into friends.
The first thing we need to do is to trust in him. To trust in Jesus. To receive this love. This gospel love that makes us friends with Almighty God enables us to seek friendship.

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