PM Philemon One Body in Christ

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Preacher: Rev David Parker

[0:00] So, if you could turn in your Bible with me to the New Testament, and we're going to read the Apostle Paul's letter to Philemon.

The Bible I've got here in the pulpit, it's on page 1273, but it might be 1202 if you have a pew Bible. So, it's actually just before Hebrews.
So, if you find Hebrews and you go to the beginning of Hebrews, and then turn another page, you should come to Philemon. And we're just going to read this letter, it's got 25 verses in it.
The shortest letter of the Apostle Paul. And we read from verse 1, Paul as usual introduces himself.
Paul, a prisoner for Jesus Christ and Timothy, our brother.
To Philemon, our beloved fellow worker, and Athia, our sister, and Archippus, our fellow soldier, and the church in your house.
[1:25] Grace to you, and peace from God our Father, and the Lord Jesus Christ. 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.
For I have derived much joy and comfort from your love, my brother. Because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you.
Accordingly, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do what is required, yet, for love's sake, I prefer to appeal to you.
I, Paul, an old man, and now a prisoner also, for Christ Jesus. I appeal to you for my child, Anesimus, whose father I became in my imprisonment.
[2:45] 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.

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 I referred to do nothing without your consent, in order that your goodness might not be by compulsion, but of your own accord.
For this, perhaps, is why he was parted from you for a while, that you might have him back forever, 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. So if you considered me your partner, receive him as you would receive me.
[3:59] If he has wronged you at all, or owes you anything, charge that to my account. I, Paul, write this with my own hand.

I will repay it.
Hoping that through your prayers, I will be graciously given to you. 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.
Amen. May the Lord add his own blessing to the reading of his word. You have your Bible, you could turn back with me to Paul's letter to Philemon.
[5:23] As I was saying, this is the shortest letter that we find in the New Testament of Paul's letters.

And it's a very personal letter. Although it's not simply, maybe mainly to Philemon.
But you can see in these opening verses, it's also sent to the church. Or the church is mentioned, anyway, in Philemon's house.

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It's a letter that is perhaps somewhat challenging in terms of how one is going to approach it. And how one is going to deliver a sermon on it. One could, for example, just go through the verses from beginning to end.
[6:30] And talk about the introduction. Talk about Paul's announcement of his request. And talk about the actual request.

And then talk about the conclusion. That's not how I am going to look at it. I'm going to be looking at it, in a sense, under three headings.
And that is under the heading of conversion. And of Christian partnership and sharing. And thirdly, Christology.
So in other words, I have decided to look at themes in this letter. And approach it in that fashion.
Now, the letter is about someone called Onesimus. Onesimus had been the unconverted slave of Philemon.
[7:39] Who was probably a wealthy individual. Who again probably was converted through Paul's ministry. And also, he had a church in his house.

So, as I say, Onesimus had been an unconverted slave of Philemon. But had left his master and gone to Rome.
Now, some people feel that he probably was running away. Although we're not explicitly told why he left Philemon. Certainly, at one point, as we will hear later on in this letter.
Paul says, If he has wronged you in any way, I will repay it. But we don't actually know.
All we know is that he was certainly unconverted. He was a slave of Philemon. And he went away and found himself in Rome.
[8:53] Now, in Rome, he was converted through Paul's ministry while Paul was in prison. And that's just wonderful itself.

Do you think that although Paul was incarcerated, although he was in chains. And I think that it's probable that, whether it was at that point, I know that at some point, Paul actually was in chains. He actually mentions it in one of his other letters. And the wonderful thing is that he's still working for God. He's still interested in the kingdom of God.
He's still interested in bringing people that don't know Christ to know him. But because Paul was in prison, he was unable to take Onesimus back to Philemon.
So Onesimus came back with someone called Tychicus. And they had a letter from Paul to give to Philemon.
[10:01] And this is it that we're looking at tonight. The situation of Onesimus' return to Philemon was fraught with many dangers.

How will Philemon respond? Particularly if he had stolen stuff from him or had injured, I don't mean physically necessarily, or offended Philemon in some way.
But as I say, we're not really told. But the situation is fraught with many dangers. How will Philemon respond? Could Onesimus be in danger of legal recrimination?
Might the situation prove to be contentious with the church? Especially when we remember that, as we'll see, Paul is asking Philemon to receive him back, not as he was before he left, but as a full brother in Christ.
Could it result in a breakdown of relations between Paul and Philemon? For all those reasons, Paul and more, Paul writes a letter of incredible tact and sensitivity, not based on his normal apostolic authority, but, and this is how I would put it, on an even more powerful basis.
[11:38] And that more powerful basis is mentioned in many places, but it's mentioned at verse 9. Well, I'll read from verse 8.

Accordingly, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do what is required, yet for love's sake I prefer to appeal to you.
This is from the great apostle who, remember, in his first letter to the Corinthians, famously said, when he was talking about all the great gifts of prophecy and preaching and all those other gifts, he then went on to say to the congregation in Corinthians, but I show you a more excellent way.
And that more excellent way was the way of love. And he unpacked love. Love doesn't think about itself.
Love thinks always about the other. Always. That is why Jesus Christ is the Christ for others.
[12:53] So much pathos and emotion is in this letter.

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So much strong feeling. So much tenderness. So much intimacy. So much in close bonds. It's truly, as Paul puts it, for love's sake, I prefer to appeal to you.
And there are some situations sometimes in congregations and in maybe situations with another believer, another brother or sister in Christ, when we need to ditch the formality and the mechanical way and the official way and we need to say like Paul, for love's sake, I appeal to you.
Paul's entire life was a labour of love for Christ.
Look at his opening. I, Paul, a prisoner for Jesus Christ. Paul doesn't need to get anybody to prove his his recommendation.
[14:37] His walk, not merely his talk, his walk proved his reputation. His reputation. The love of Christ truly constrained the Apostle Paul.

That was the engine and the driving force of his ministry, of his Christianity. A Christianity not for himself, for others.
I became, says Paul in another place, all things for all people that I might save some by all means.
As I say, I want to look at this passage using three themes. And the first thing I want, the first theme I want to use is the conversion of Onesimus.
We see this in verse 10. I appeal to you for my child, or some translations have it, my son, Onesimus, whose father I became in my imprisonment.
[16:20] I think there's a touch of pathos there as well, isn't there? I might be incarcerated, but the spirit of God is not incarcerated.

I might be incarcerated, but God can still use me even in this situation to be the spiritual father of one who's a runaway slave.
Conversion isn't a word we hear a lot of today, and yet conversion isn't something that is optional, it's something that is absolutely necessary.
Jesus in Matthew's Gospel in chapter 18 and verse 3 said this, Truly I say to you, unless you turn, or as the AV, the old AV has, be converted, the ESV is simply interpreting what the Greek word means, which does mean turn or change.
Truly I say to you, unless you turn and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.
[18:03] Who's he speaking to his disciples? His followers? Those that at least outwardly are suggesting they want to be part of that kingdom.

Unless he says, you turn and be converted, you'll never even get into the kingdom of heaven.
You might be able to put on your CV churchgoer 52 weeks a year. You might be able to put on your CV lots of knowledge of the Bible, could pass exams on them.
you might be able to put in your CV, I'm a professor of theology.
But Jesus says, I'll give you the context, at that time the disciples came to Jesus saying, who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?
[19:19] and calling to him a child, he put that child in the midst of them and said, truly I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest. What was going on there?
His disciple says, who's the greatest? What was going on there is, they were aiming for something for themselves. Their life was driven by power and prestige.
and self aggrandizement. Jesus said, you're mistaken.
Unless you turn and become a little child, forget your power and forget your prestige and forget your self aggrandizement and become like a dependent little child on me and on God and become like a little child that trusts their parents exclusively.
[20:57] conversion is a turning within the mind.

I was saying this morning, wasn't I, that faith isn't simply ascent to a statement I believe in Jesus or I believe in God or I believe God created the universe or I believe there is a God or I believe in what he's saying.
If that's all faith was, it is pretty low in the scheme of things. It's radical and it's revolutionary because it involves a turning at the core of our being.
Are we converted? That's the question that Jesus would be asking us. what or who is the main driver of our own life, our dreams, our hopes, our goals?
What is it we're about? It can even be dressed up as religion. Paul is saying to Philemon, your former slave, Philemon, has been converted.

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[22:54] He is my child, he is my son, I am a spiritual father. I have a great love for him.

And because he's converted, he is what Paul calls in another part of the New Testament, a new creation. He is now in the body of Christ.
he is now part of the spiritual church of Jesus Christ, his body.
He shares in every blessing that is promised to every and any believer. I appeal to you at verse 10 for my child Onesimus, whose father I became in my imprisonment.
Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful to you and me. I am sending him back to you.
[24:23] Look what Paul says, sending my very heart. Now this word heart is used three times in this letter. And you know, I can't even pronounce the word.

it's a strange word, something like splag cananan. And it refers to our guts.
It refers to the visceral depths of where our real feelings are. This is why the English translations have used the word heart.
heart. But actually the word heart, even in the New Testament, is kardia. That's where we get cardiology. You're getting sent to cardiology.
The Greek word is kardia. And it expresses a mighty intense feeling of love and compassion.
[25:39] the Bible tells us that Jesus was moved with compassion. He didn't have a pen in his hand and say, wait and I'll do this today.

he's dealing with human beings with great need.
He wanted to bring hope to them. You see, the gospel radically changes people.
And it also changes their social status. It impacts the social side of our life and society.
Is that not what Paul is suggesting to Philemon? I am sending him back to you.
[26:55] Sending my very heart. And then in verse 15 he says, for this perhaps is why he was parted from you for a while, that you might have him back.

Forever. No longer as a slave Philemon. Not these social hierarchies that you're a slave owner, but more than a slave.
And look at the words. A beloved brother, a dearly loved individual. I'm appealing to you, yeah, on the basis of love.
Paul indeed strengthens his appeal in verse 17. So, if you consider me a partner, now this is the word koinonia or koinonius, and this word means sharing.
This is the word that's used to point to the fact that every single person who's a real Christian forms part together of the body of Christ.
[28:33] And that's he uses the word sharing earlier on in verse six and he uses the word we'll come back to them a bit later and he uses the word partner in verse 17.

So, if you consider me your partner that's rhetorical by the way, of course Philemon considers him as his partner ever since Philemon was converted under Paul's ministry, how have I to receive him back?
If you consider me your partner, receive him as you would receive me. Some radical change, would you not agree?
But this change has come about through a genuine conversion experience. I want to move on secondly to what I'm calling Christian partnership and sharing.
We've just read this word partner. And this partnership and fellowship runs through the entire letter either implicitly or explicitly.
[30:04] For example, look at the first three verses of Paul's opening. and look at the plural pronouns.

Timothy, our brother, Philemon, our beloved fellow worker, and Athia, our sister, and Archippus, our fellow soldier, and the church in your house.
The church is a community of koinonia, a fellowship, a partnership, a sharing. And Paul explores this by his metaphor of parts of the body in his letter to the Corinthians.
Philemon's faith might yield the full knowledge through sharing his faith in verse 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.
Now that's a wee bit difficult that verse and it's a bit sort of the sentence structure of it and grammar is a bit difficult. but it could be something like, and it's interesting if there is any, I've not got this out of a commentary but it's a guess of mine, it could be something like you know something, when we

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realise our relation to each other and that the one sitting beside us is a brother or sister as we are in the body of Christ and as we explore that more and engage more, it means that we begin to, in verse 6 there, become effective for the full knowledge of every good thing that is in us for the sake of Christ, not ourselves.
[32:32] but what is this partnership and sharing all believers have in Christ?

It's nothing less than the great truth that I've been saying all the time, is that all of us are one body, all believers, all believers that have ever been and will ever be, and all believers of any and every denomination, where they have had this conversion experience, and I don't mean when I use that phrase, conversion experience, that it needs to be dramatic or even dated, but I mean they really have been united to Christ as I was mentioning this morning.
Paul uses this catch phrase dozens of times in Christ, in Christ off.
You say, well I'm in a church. Great. Nothing wrong with that. Probably a good place to be, especially if you're hearing the truths of the Bible and the truths of Jesus Christ.
But the fundamental $64,000 question is this, are you in Christ? In Christo? Because only those who are in Christ form part of his body.
[34:24] Calvin makes several comments comments about this participation of all believers in Christ and I'm just going to rattle off some of them for you as I see the time is going on.

Only, this is Calvin, not me, only by being spiritually united to Jesus Christ can we receive all the benefits of his salvation.
No one is justified by faith unless they're united to Christ. Calvin, it follows that believers are united to one another.
Of course it does. If every believer is united to Christ and that's a definition of a real believer, then it follows that they're all together. Our union, says Calvin, our sharing, our partnership in the body of Christ is not of the divine substance but of the life of Jesus Christ.
I'm just throwing those out, they're open for discussion. There is no justification, says Calvin, or sanctification outside this union with Christ.
[35:47] Christ. It is affected, Calvin again, by the Holy Spirit through faith, which Calvin says, believe it or not, is nothing except instrumental.

I should have given you an amber light to say that this was a bit theological.
biblical. This participation and unity in Christ and of one another is critical to our witness in the world because it's not an abstract and theoretical thing.
Again, a phrase I used this morning, I'll use it again, it's an existential, dynamic, organic thing that flows out in an expressive way, if it's real.
John 17, I want to read some verses from John 17. They are astounding.
[37:08] I'll read from verse 20 to 23. Think of what we've been talking about, united to Christ, in Christ, in Christ, spiritually.

I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word. This is Jesus' final prayer before he goes out of this room with these disciples and is arrested.
And the betrayer meets him with an arresting mob. I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one.
Just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, but wait for it, so that the world may believe that you sent me.
The glory that you have given me, I have given to them, that they may be one, even as we are one, I in them, you in me, that they may become perfectly one, again, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them, even as you loved me.
[38:57] it's a beautiful statement at the end, eh? The unspeakable, ineffable love between the Father and the Son. And he says, and love them, even as you love me.

Paul says, I'm appealing on the basis of love. This is far more powerful than my authority. will the love of Christ enable us to love and receive each other as equals in Jesus Christ?
Only when that is truly happening will there be true koinonia, true partnership and true sharing and true fellowship. others, you see, are every bit as important as we are.
Love your neighbour as yourself. Finally, another wee bit of theology as we go into the last part of this.
I've looked at conversion and I've looked at the commonality of all believers being in Christ. I thirdly look at what I want to call Christology and it's Paul's Christology in this very letter of Philemon.

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[40:48] It's obvious I'm sure you'll agree with me by the time I've concluded my final point. Paul sees parallels between this situation e.g.

this triangle between Philemon Onesimus and Paul. And his Christology, all Christology means is one's understanding of the person and being of Jesus Christ, his identity and his work, his saving, redeeming work.
So theologians, instead of saying all that, they just say Christology. Paul sees parallels between this situation and his own Christology and we see those parallels in the final points Paul makes as he finishes his request with a crescendo.
His request, you see, as you know, that Philemon will take him back, not as a slave, but as a brother beloved in Christ. Four things.
Welcome him. Verse 17. So if you consider me your partner, receive him as you would receive me.
[42:22] Now that word receive is translated in the ESV on every other occasion as welcome and it's translated in the NIV as welcome and it's translated in the ARSV as welcome, that's obvious why, because it has that connotation.

And that leads me to think of this, this man welcomes sinners. are we ready to welcome sinners? Even the worst. Paul says, as you would welcome me, Philemon, I'm asking you to welcome Onesimus.
No longer see him and no longer treat him as a slave, but a dear brother in Christ whom God has received and welcomed.
Onesimus is every bit Philemon in Christ and his body, the church.
[44:02] Not withstanding the different social, cultural and class differences, I don't have time to go into all of that, in contemporary society, of Paul he represents.

And perhaps Paul was maybe thinking of this as well, he doesn't say it's a pure guess of mine, but I think it's an educated guess, because Paul talks about before we became Christians in Romans chapter 6, I think it is, he says, we were all slaves.
And that is right. And Jesus Christ said, he that sins is the slave of sin.
We all need to be emancipated and liberated from the slavery of sins. Sins is not just things that incur penalties.
sin is a thing whose power needs to be broken. Welcome as Christ welcomed.
[45:18] Verse 18, if Onesimus has wronged you at all, or owes you anything, charge that to my account.

We know that Paul has the exact same language almost as he describes the redemption that's in Jesus Christ, as we were talking about even this morning.
Oh, all my guilt and all my shame. It's in my account, but Jesus Christ came and lifted it out of my account and put it in his own account and died for our sins.
This is the great exchange that we were talking about this morning. Jesus becomes what we are and we become what he is.
Luther could say he was just like the greatest sinner on that cross of all time because what can you say? I don't really know what you can say.
[46:49] The mountain, the Everest of everyone's sin weighed upon his shoulders and he bore it away in that great cry, my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

In that abandonment, in that rupture of that infinite, exquisite, eternal love between the father and the son. And then Paul being Paul, Paul, he says, I, Paul, write this with my own hand, I will repay. But then he says, to say nothing of your owing me, your very own self. Which is possibly a reference to the conversion of Philemon through Paul's ministry.
But it's true, isn't it? Christ died for the ungodly. he pays us and we're the one that owe him. Welcome.
Charge any wrong. Thirdly, refresh my heart. In verse 20, yes, brother, I want some benefit from you in the Lord.
[48:33] refresh my heart. I think there's a lot of pathos in that one as well. He's already said he's an old man. He's already said he's a prisoner.

He doesn't want to use his stock apostolic authority. He wants to appeal on the basis of love. And he's saying to Philemon, Philemon, you've refreshed, I'm so pleased to hear that you've refreshed the hearts of many believers.

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That's right at the beginning, early on there. He says, I could do with a wee bit of refreshment, you know. I could do with a wee bit of my age and the situation that I'm in, just to feel the refreshment that you're going to do that.
You're going to respond to this request in the way that I'm pleading with you that you will. And all I want to say is, that word really is to do with compassion.
I've already mentioned it. Why on earth does anybody in this room think that clouds, crowds flocked to Jesus Christ, the most holy person that ever walked on the planet?
[50:05] Why do you think they flocked to him? Were they not recoiled from him in his brilliant light, sort of killing him there and then? It's because he was filled with compassion.

People know out there if you care about them. Knocking on a door and saying I'll give them the gospel and I'll hand a track in, they know if you care about them or not.
People knew Jesus cared about them. refresh my heart Philemon please, please refresh my heart. Show compassion. Finally, verse 22 to, 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.
Paul finishes then with a subsidiary request from his friend and brother that through his prayers God will free him to visit the congregation.
[51:34] salvation. And what's that saying? I think it's saying this, that Paul relished and valued face-to-face visits with people.

The letters in a sense were a second best. He wanted to meet face-to-face with his brothers and sisters.
And perhaps also due to his closeness to Onesimus, he would have been refreshed even more to see Onesimus in person in the congregation being accepted as a full brother in Christ.
As we close, let's remember Jesus said, unless you're converted, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven.
And let's remember that no matter who we are, a homeless person, a tramp, a gypsy, a thief, a slave, a runaway slave, when we are converted, truly converted, truly trusted Jesus Christ, truly put our faith in him, we are every bit in Christ, a royal person, if they were a true believer.
[53:13] And let's also remember that theology is not for abstract, theoretical argument, argument, it's to inspire us, to seek to be, by God's grace, Christ-like.

Amen.

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