

The Gospel Changes Everything (Philemon 1-7)

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 02 November 2025

Preacher: Brett Sanders

[0 : 00] And this week we're going to be starting a new series. We finished up the book of James last week. And this week we're going to be in Philemon. Now I'm going to go ahead and tell you we're going to be in Philemon because it may take you a minute to find it.

It is one of the smallest books in the Bible. In fact, if you want to go ahead and start making your way there, no shame if you look at the table of contents to help find it there. But if you find Hebrews, then just go back one book of the Bible and you'll be right there in Philemon.

But as you make your way there, I can remember the first time that I ever got to go see a PG-13 movie in the movie theaters. The movie was The Mummy.

And this took place back in the 1900s. And so, you know, just barely. It was 1999. But every time somebody says that, I felt so old.

Like I didn't think the 1900s was that far ago. But I can remember this taking place. And we had talked Dad into taking... Mom, I'm not even sure you know about this.

[1 : 01] But we had talked Dad into taking us to see The Mummy in the theaters. And I was barely old enough at the time to see this, which means that my younger brother, Blake, probably wasn't quite old enough to see it.

But for some reason, we talked Dad into allowing us to go see it anyway. And so I can remember going in and everything was great. We thought we were big stuff being able to go see this PG-13 movie in the theaters.

But then we realized why it was rated PG-13. And there were some pretty intense scenes for some younger kids. And I think my dad started regretting taking Blake to see this.

And so all of a sudden, Dad gets up. Towards the end of the movie, there's a good portion of the movie left, but it's towards the end of the movie, he gets up and he motions for us to go with him. Well, Blake follows him. And again, I feel like I'm remembering this correctly, but again, it was back in the 1900s. But I can remember him motioning for us to leave with him.

[2 : 02] And I just pretended like I didn't see that he was motioning us to leave. So him and Blake left the movie theater and were waiting in the car. And I feel like I remember this correctly because I kind of remember seeing the look on my dad's face when I finally emerged from the movie theater and made my way out to the car.

But the thing is, I don't like to miss out on what's going to happen. I like to know the story, right? I don't like to come in at the middle of a movie or leave before it's over because I want to know what happens.

Now, some of you may not be that way. Some of you may, it can get, you know, intense or whatnot, and you're fine with not even knowing how it ends. I like to have a good conclusion to the story.

And so we like to know how a story ends. And nobody likes to come in late to a movie and leave before it's over because we like to know the story.

However, this is sometimes where we find ourselves when we come to Scripture. We don't always know how a story begins. We don't always know how a story ends.

[3 : 07] For example, if you look at the book of Jonah, for example, listen to how the last two verses of Jonah conclude. Jonah, it says this.

After everything that's happened, it says, And the Lord said, You pity the plant for which you did not labor, nor did you make it grow, which came into being in a night and perished in a night. And should not I pity Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than 120,000 persons, who do not know their right hand from their left, and also much cattle?

The end. It ends right there and you're thinking, Well, God, what's the deal with the cattle? Why all the cattle? Why ending this with a question? What happens next? How does Jonah respond to this

next?

Or even if you look over in Judges, Judges chapter 3, verse 31, this is the story of Shamgar, and this is the whole story of Shamgar. It says this. And after him was Shamgar, the son of Anath, who killed 600 Philistines with an ox goad, and he also saved Israel.

That's all we know. This guy kills 600 people with an ox goad, which, what's an ox goad? And also he saves all of Israel. But this is all that we have on this passage.

[4 : 24] But sometimes God in his wisdom doesn't give us the rest of this story. And so this week, we're going to be starting a new series that's going to take us, really for about the next three weeks or so, through the book of Philemon.

And in this story, we find ourselves coming into the middle of this story. We don't exactly know the beginning of this story. We don't know how Philemon came to faith in Christ.

We don't know a lot of those things. And we certainly don't know how this story ends. But in the middle section, what we're able to see is the beauty of the gospel on display.

In this middle section of this story, God is showing us the beauty of the gospel and how that changes who we are. And so with this being such a short book of the Bible, I want us to read this entire letter of Paul to Philemon this morning.

And so I encourage you to follow along as we read God's word. This is what it says. It says, Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus, 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.

[5 : 38] Grace to you and peace from God our Father and 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 for Christ Jesus, I appeal to you 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 to me. I'm 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 prefer to do nothing without your consent in order that your goodness might not be by compulsion, but by 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 bondservant, but more than a bondservant, a beloved brother, especially to me, but now more to you, but both in the flesh and in the Lord.

[7 : 14] So if you consider me your partner, receive him as you would receive me. 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. To say nothing of your owing me, even your own life. Yes, brother, I want 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 say. And 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.

Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ, sends you 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.

You see, the book of Philemon is one of the prison epistles. You're probably able to pick up on that on all of the times that Paul talks about his imprisonment in here. And Paul is writing during his imprisonment at the end of the book of Acts.

[8 : 21] And it was written at the same time as the book of Colossians was delivered and probably would have been delivered with it. Most of the commentaries that you see, for one, because Philemon is so short and wouldn't require a pretty extensive commentary, most of the time, they combine this with Colossians because it was written at the same time and the church was meeting in Philemon's house in Colossae.

And so this would have been written at the same time, most likely delivered at the same time. And you can see Colossians 4 and 9 as a reference for this. And the book is written to Philemon from Paul about Onesimus who was a runaway slave from Philemon.

And what's interesting about this book is throughout church history, many people have used the book of Philemon for different purposes. There have actually been those who've used the book of Philemon to make an argument for slavery many years ago.

But there's also been so many that have used this as a means for calling for the abolition of slavery. And I think we can all agree that that's where we land today, that this book is calling for the abolition of slavery.

Now that being said, Paul doesn't take this opportunity to fully address the issue of slavery. And I think part of that is a huge population of Colossae would have been considered slaves and it would be difficult for a small house church, probably 30 to 50 people in size, to change a whole system.

[9 : 52] And I love how Danny Akin, he makes some notes about this. He says, Paul used great wisdom in not confronting slavery head on because to do so would have been very subversive and would have been something that would have gotten in the way of the gospel.

He says, but Paul also knew that the outworking of the gospel would eventually be a death nail to an institution like slavery. In other words, the gospel is ultimately what changes people's lives.

And when we understand the gospel, it changes our lives. And understanding this is key to understanding our first reminder in this passage. We're going to look at two things today.

Our first reminder in this passage is honestly going to be what is our theme throughout this entire series. Throughout the next three weeks, this is going to be our theme and it's going to be what we take a moment to consider this morning.

So the first reminder I'd like us to see in this passage is this. It's the gospel changes everything. The gospel, it changes everything. These first three verses.

[11 : 00] Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus and Timothy, our brother. To Philemon, our beloved fellow worker and Appiah, our sister. Now this most likely would have been Philemon's wife here.

And then to Archibus, our fellow soldier. Now there's a lot of debate on this but most likely most people believe this would be Philemon's son because of their close relationship and what Paul says next.

And the church in your house. He says, Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. And so when we understand that the gospel changes everything it's something that you will see each week as we look at this but to help us understand this I want to begin by looking at some of the characters in this short book of the Bible.

When you look at it there's 12 people who are mentioned in this book but there's three main characters. Actually four but three that we're going to look at briefly for just a moment. And those three main characters are one the author of this which would be Paul and then you also have who he's writing to Philemon and who he's writing about Onesimus.

And so when you look at these three people it's interesting to look at their different backgrounds. You have Paul who was a former proud Pharisee. If you want to look at kind of his track record and look at who he was then go to the book of Philippians and look at chapter 3 and you'll see all the things that Paul was as a Pharisee.

[12 : 26] And so you have this once proud Pharisee and then you have Philemon this very wealthy probably businessman who was traveling some for business but you have this really wealthy man and then you have Onesimus who would have been a slave and one that Alistair Begg describes as one of the dregs of Roman society.

And so you couldn't find three different more different people than this. It almost sounds like the beginning of a joke, right? You have a Pharisee, a wealthy man, a slave. They walk into a bar and then you get the punchline, right?

And so you have all of these three different people that are coming together in this story. The backgrounds could not have been more different. People would look on the outside and say what possible way would you ever find these three people associating with one another?

And the answer that Paul would give and I believe that the Bible gives is the only possible way is the gospel. The only possible way that you'll see these people from such different backgrounds coming together and associating with one another is the gospel of Christ.

Paul, Philemon, and Onesimus are the ones that get the attention in this passage but the one who brings this all together, the fourth character that we're talking about who's really at work in this is Jesus.

[13 : 47] And understanding that relationship with him that Paul has, that Philemon has, that Onesimus now has, understanding that this relationship is present is what brings these three

together.

Acts 2, 44 says, and all who believed were together and had all things in common. When you're looking at this passage which happens right here at the beginning of the early church, what you're seeing is all these people coming together and Luke describes the scene of the church and what he says is they were all together and had all things in common.

He doesn't mean they all like the same food, that they all preferred the beach to the mountains which they should have, but he's saying that they had the most important thing in common and that most important thing was Jesus.

And because of this it gave them a new identity that went far beyond their cultural or racial identities. The gospel had taken root in their lives and had changed who they were.

The beauty of this is that the gospel still does this today. The gospel still has this power today.

Nothing changes our identities or what we value most like the gospel.

[15 : 03] The gospel brings people together from different races, from different ethnicities, from different interests, different families. The gospel brings together from different economic statuses, from different geographic locations.

The gospel restores broken relationships. It reconciles relationships with each other. Just this week, our men's class, we were talking about this very issue on our Bible study on Wednesday night, of how the gospel affects our relationships with people that are tough to get along with.

People that we oftentimes don't get along with. Many of your names came up as we were talking. I'm joking. That is a hundred percent joke. I shouldn't have said that. But the gospel does change our lives in so many ways.

The gospel affects everything about us. Those that have wronged us, it changes our lives. C.S. Lewis wisely observed, he says, everyone thinks forgiveness is a lovely idea until they have something to forgive.

Everybody loves the idea of forgiveness until they have something to forgive. Until somebody needs their forgiveness. We noted that our relationships with one another, especially those where we feel we have been wronged, we must let the gospel speak to those areas and understanding that first and foremost, we are a sinner ourselves and secondly, we are sinned against.

[16 : 32] First and foremost, we are sinners in need of God's grace and only secondly are we sinned against. That we will never be asked to forgive someone more than we have been forgiven ourselves.

And understanding the gospel really does change everything. And this brings us to our final reminder that I want us to consider today and it's this.

Let us be thankful for gospel community. Let us be thankful for gospel community. verses 4 through 7. It says, 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 showing 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.

Even though Christians may experience trials and conflicts with one another because of the gospel, because of our relationship with Christ, we can lift each other up in prayer.

[17 : 49] We can encourage one another and celebrate the change that God has already begun in our lives. We see this taking place in the context of gospel community and the church when we look at this.

Paul is writing to an individual, but he's also writing to the church that's meeting in this individual's home. And we know this because he not only addresses Philemon here, but he also addresses the church when he uses the plural form of you here.

He's understanding that this is to Philemon, but it's also going to be read for the church and ultimately it's going to be read to us today. In these few verses, Paul is showing his thankfulness for the sanctification that is taking place in Philemon's life.

And he does this by stating his thankfulness for Philemon's devotion to God, what God has already done, and by praying for the change that comes about because of gospel community.

The change that comes about because believers are gathering together in fellowship, doing life together, and he writes about this. Much change has already taken place in his life.

[19:01] Paul shows us of how thankful he is for Philemon's devotion to God as he opens and he closes this paragraph. If you look at verses 4 and 5 and then also 7, you'll see he's thankful for what God has already done.

This is deeply personal. He says, I thank my God and my prayers. And he says, and I hear about these things. This is a deeply personal and genuine relationship that he has with Philemon that he's writing to, he's thankful for.

It's not hard to be thankful and pray for this dear friend who has already been so faithful. It's not hard to be thankful for this man who's opened up his home so that there can be a church in Colossae.

Who's this wealthy man who has a house large enough for a church to meet in. It's not hard to be thankful for his generosity and the ways that he's already been faithful to God.

But also in anticipation of his request for Onesimus, Paul wants Philemon to know that he is aware of all the good things that he is doing. I laughed when I read Spurgeon's thoughts on this this week.

[20:14] He says, and when you are about to ask a favor for anyone, of anyone, it is always well to show your gratitude for what you or others have already received from them.

Most children learn this pretty quickly, right? Mom, dad, or better yet, Nana and Papa, you are the best. Can you please buy this for me? You know, can you buy it?

And so you're sharing what you're thankful for, but then you're bringing this request to them. Now this is not exactly what is going on in this passage. It's not exactly the same thing because manipulation and flattery is not exactly Paul's style.

It's not exactly the way that he usually operates. Rather, I think Paul is using this as a discipleship moment. He's using this as a way of encouraging him and challenging him at the same time.

He's reminding Philemon of his relationship with Christ and how that changes everything in anticipation of the request for Onesimus. Paul wants Philemon to know that he is aware of all the good things he is doing.

[21:24] And Paul is hearing good things and he's hoping for even better things from this man of God. So let us be thankful for the gospel change we see in our lives because of what Christ has done.

The gospel not only changes how and where we spend our eternity, but the gospel changes here and now as well. The gospel absolutely absolutely has the power to change our eternity of how and where we're going to spend that.

But the gospel also has power to change here and now in our lives. And so this is what we see taking place in Philemon's life. But we also see another component in this encouragement to Philemon.

And that is Paul's prayer for continued obedience experience that is fostered in the context of gospel community. Listen to verse 6.

It says this, And I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective for the full knowledge of the full knowledge of every good thing that is in us for the sake of Christ.

[22:32] Christ. This verse is probably the verse I spent most of my time trying to wrap my mind around this week. And it was actually really encouraging when I was reading Douglas Moo on this. He started off saying this verse is universally recognized as the most difficult in all of Philemon.

Part of the difficulty comes from the phrase sharing of your faith. Alistair Begg, he noted that regretfully, he regretfully taught on this passage one time and used it as speaking to the importance of evangelism.

And while evangelism is absolutely important to sharing our faith, that's missing the point of what Paul is saying here in this. Many translations like the ESV translate koinonia here as the sharing with others.

Like CSB, it translates this verse, I pray that your participation in the faith, not sharing, but your participation in the faith may be effective through knowing every good thing that is in us for the glory of Christ.

And I think Paul's point is this, is that we share in fellowship, which is what koinonia ultimately means is this fellowship. We participate in fellowship within the church, this sharing of our faith, that we should pray that our faith will be active and effective.

[23:55] In other words, that our faith will actually be fleshed out. That we won't just claim to be followers of Christ in community, but that this community, this community of faith will put our faith

into action.

That it'll make it effective to go out and to spread God's word throughout everybody we come in contact with. Paul is praying that their shared life in the gospel will be what energizes the manner in which they conduct themselves.

because fellowship within the church is far more than sharing a meal together. It is life-giving. It's life-transforming. It is crucial in our sanctification.

All too often, we see our sanctification as a task to be completed that we're just going to hopefully complete it one day and we'll be done with it. Many of you recently have started reading through together as a church doing a chronological reading through the New Testament.

And many of you are going through that, but let me go ahead and tell you, at the end of the year when you finish the New Testament, we're not going to give you a certificate that says, alright, you are completely sanctified. You're done.

[25 : 03] You don't have to be disciplined anymore. Congratulations. That's not going to happen. This is a lifelong process that we're supposed to live out in the context of community.

And reading scripture is a great place to start, but we also must understand that we're made for fellowship. We're made for community. We need fellowship with other believers to help us grow. We need Sunday school. We need life groups to help us in this journey. We need corporate worship. In short, we need our family. We need each other in this process of growing in our relationship with Christ.

When Catherine and I first got married, there was little that I thought that she could do wrong. I thought that she was just perfect, you know, that she would never do anything wrong. And I definitely thought that I was going to be the easiest person to ever live with.

I thought, I mean, I had no obnoxious qualities about me. And so I was going to, it was just going to be great for her, great for me. It's just going to be smooth sailing, really easy. But then all of a sudden I realized, I learned some really horrible things about Catherine.

[26 : 13] Like she likes to squeeze the toothpaste from the middle of the toothpaste. All right, who does that? It just squeezes it from the middle of the toothpaste. And then she also had these horrible things that she did with syrup and flour.

She would put them in the refrigerator. She would put flour, baking flour, in the refrigerator, put syrup in the refrigerator. I'm like, who does this? And then all of a sudden she had these unrealistic expectations of me.

Like wanting me to go to bed at the same time that she goes to bed. I mean, unrealistic things. Hopefully you can see that Catherine was not the problem in this.

That it was my selfishness. Who cares if the flour is in the refrigerator? Who cares if you squeeze the toothpaste from the middle? Who cares? Well, actually, I don't like syrup because nobody wants cold syrup on their pancakes.

But all of these things were things that I had issues with. They were all surrounded by me. And then all of a sudden I realized that I had some pretty selfish tendencies.

[27 : 15] And then kids start coming along and all of a sudden even if you want everything in your life to revolve around you, you learn pretty quickly that it doesn't. Just in my immediate family because of those relationships I've been able to identify selfish tendencies and begin working on those things.

Now, it's a process and you can ask any person in my family that I am still a work in progress. That there are many things that I need to change about my life.

There are many things that I need to do differently in my life. But what we're seeing in a similar way is that we are encouraged in this passage to let our family, our faith family, be a part of our sanctification.

How do we do this? Well, one, we let our family be our family. We let our family actually be our family. We understand that fellowship is far more than a covered dish meal that we do once in a while.

But it's doing life with one another. And when we do life with our family, then we'll not only be able to see our sin more clearly, but we'll let our family be able to hold us accountable for that sin that is in our life.

[28 : 27] And so what we must do is to let this community, this gospel community, this church, be our family to get plugged in, to get invested in it.

And so let us first and foremost be transformed by the gospel. That's where we must start. We must do this personally. May we never lose sight of the fact that Jesus is our only hope.

That's our only hope in life. And that the news that Jesus left, the glory of heaven, lived the life that we couldn't live and died the death we deserve is the greatest news the world has ever heard.

It's the absolute greatest news the world has ever heard. And if you have not experienced that relationship personally, then I encourage you to talk with me after the service. Talk with a parent that brought you.

Talk with a friend that brought you. Talk with a Sunday school. Talk with somebody. But make sure you get this right before you leave today. But for those of us who have a relationship with Jesus, then let us lean into our family.

[29 : 28] Let us lean into our family. Maybe that means joining or at least starting a conversation. I would love to talk with you about this.

And you have an incredible opportunity today. If you're thinking about that, you can join us for breakfast right after the service in the youth room. And if we're running low on breakfast items, Evan doesn't have to eat.

He'll be all right. But we want you to start having those conversations. We want you to be thinking about those things. Because it's not just, this isn't just a nice thing that we do when we come together.

But this community, this gospel community, when we understand it the way that we're supposed to understand it is life transforming. It's life giving. It becomes something that we desperately need in our lives to grow in our relationship with Christ.

And so maybe that means getting plugged into a Sunday school class. Maybe that means joining a life group on Wednesday nights. But it absolutely means leaning in to our gospel community that we call our church here.

[30 : 37] Understanding that those relationships are incredibly important. So as we think about this, may we be transformed by the gospel and continue to be transformed by gospel community.

Father, thank you so very much for your word, for what it teaches us about you. And Lord, I thank you for giving us a glimpse into the early church where it's not just a letter written to the church, but it's a letter written to individuals of the church and letting us get a glimpse of real life things that the church was going through.

And God, thank you so much for making it so clear that the gospel changes everything about us. That it's good news for our eternity, absolutely, but it's good news for us today because it transforms our life today.

And God, thank you for giving us a window into the church to help us understand that we're made for community, that we're made to experience this fellowship that can happen when believers come together and do life together.

And so Lord, help us to lean into that. Help us to lean into that gospel community that transforms our lives in powerful ways. So Lord, thank you so much for Jesus.

[31 : 58] Thank you for the difference that he makes in our life each and every day. We ask all this in his name. Amen. I'm going to invite you to stand. We're going to sing a song of invitation. If God is speaking to you this morning, won't you respond as we stand together and sing?