

The Gospel Promotes Humility (Philemon 8-16)

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[0 : 00] Well, this morning, I want to ask a question to you. Have you ever known people who aren't very tactful?!

And she goes, you know, what you're saying is good. It's good. It's great. But sometimes how you say it, it could come across a little angry. And I was like, no, we can't. I didn't say it. But I said, okay, well, I'll take that and try to think about that and think about how I say things.

And I think it's something that is important for all of us to begin thinking about how we say things.

Dr. Danny Akin was one of my professors in cemetery. People have made that joke so many times to me that I didn't. I promise I didn't. In seminary, he was one of my professors.

And he would often part from his notes sometimes and he would just share some words of wisdom that he had learned from many years of ministry. And I remember one of the things that he would often tell us. He says, in ministry and life, for that matter, few things are more important, more valuable than knowing how to say the right thing.

Think about that. He said, in ministry and life, for that matter, few things are more important, more valuable than knowing how to say the right thing.

[1 : 45] What do you mean how to say the right thing? If you're saying the right thing, it doesn't matter how you say it, right? Says every man who's never been married. But he says, but Dr. Akin, he went on to say, he says, we need to learn how to say the right thing in the right way at the right time and to the right person.

So much in life is not just being right, but it's understanding how to graciously show our brothers and sisters what the truth is.

And so in our passage today, Paul is showing us by his example of the importance of dealing with potential issues in a tactful and godly manner.

He is also showing us we're not to avoid difficult conversations, but we're to approach them in a manner that brings God's name, honor, and glory. We mentioned last week that we're coming into the middle of the story of Philemon, and we don't know the history of Philemon and Onesimus' relationship.

Although, what we're going to be able to see next week especially is there seems to be some tension. There seems to be something that happened there where Onesimus probably stole from Philemon because we see next week in verse 18 where Paul says, and he tells Philemon, he says, if he's taken anything from you, if he owes you anything, put that on my account.

[3 : 06] And so we'll unpack that a little bit next week, but we see at least from the get-go that there seems to be something going on that would cause tension in this relationship.

And so he begins to address this, and so it's pretty safe to assume that Onesimus most likely took something from Philemon, and for a slave to have stolen from his master, that would have been a very serious offense that came with serious consequences.

So the amount of confidence that Paul and Onesimus show in the gospel here, the amount of confidence they have that the gospel changes lives is pretty staggering to think about.

They're sending, they're confident enough in the gospel, and the gospel, the fact that it changes people's lives, that they're sending Onesimus back to reconcile this relationship. And it's a beautiful picture of the power of the gospel to change.

And that's what we emphasized last week, the fact that the gospel changes everything in our lives. The gospel brings people together, makes us thankful for transformation.

[4 : 11] It works through gospel community in powerful ways. And this week, we begin to see how the gospel changes, how we deal with conflict, or at least the potential for conflict within the church, but really outside the church walls as well.

And so this is important because conflict almost seems to be unavoidable in our life. You know, the last few months, we've been studying through the book of James.

And in James chapter 4, James addresses this very issue within the church. He addresses the fact that they're experiencing conflict.

And we know that James was one of the first books of the New Testament to be written. And so very early on in the life of the church, James is having to ask this question, what causes quarrels and what causes fights among you?

Because they're experiencing these things. And conflict many times seems to be unavoidable in our day and time. I've been to many pastors' conferences and read books on the importance of church health and dealing with conflict in the church.

[5 : 17] And one of the things that always comes up, they always say, well, even if you're not dealing with this now, just store it away because you're going to be dealing with it at some point. I'm like, well, that doesn't, it's not really encouraging for long-term ministry somewhere, is it?

You know, you may not be dealing with it now, but just hold on, it's coming. You're going to be able to, you're going to have to deal with conflict. And so many times it feels unavoidable. But thankfully, the Bible is not silent on the issues that occur within the church.

I'm thankful that it doesn't hide those issues. I'm thankful that it doesn't paint an unrealistic picture of doing ministry with people who are saved, but at the same time are still struggling with sin, that are still struggling with these different things.

And it understands that there's going to be these things that happen. But what we see as the case with Philemon is we get to see real-life examples of how to deal with it.

And so that being said, if you have a copy of God's Word, I want to invite you to turn with me to Philemon. And we're going to start in verse 8 and read through verse 16.

[6 : 25] And this is what God's Word says. It says this,

And so in this passage, we see not only does the gospel have the power to change our relationship with God, but the gospel has the power to change our relationships and restore broken relationships here on earth as well.

And so as we think about this passage this morning, there are a few reminders that we see from Paul's actions that we would benefit from, and also those around us who are hurting would benefit from us using them.

And so to begin with, what I want us to see is the gospel promotes humility. The gospel promotes humility. He says, 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. He says in effect here, he says, I'm an apostle, I'm your spiritual father, so I could have spoken to you with authority.

[8 : 38] I could have demanded that you do what is right. I could have given you specific instructions on how you need to handle this situation. He says, But for love's sake, I appeal to you.

I ask you to do what is right. I'm asking you to do what is right. Paul is telling him that he doesn't want Philemon to be forced to do something that he doesn't want to do, but rather, Paul wants Philemon to look at his own relationship with Jesus and understand that the gospel changes differently.

The gospel doesn't just change our actions, but it changes us from the inside out. He says, You have a new heart now, and so I'm appealing to you to do what it is that you are called to do.

It doesn't just change our actions, but it changes our desires. What he's saying is, He says, I don't want you just to do the right thing, but I want you to want to do the right thing.

I want you to do this because this is what God has called you to do. And you see, He could have asked him to do, He could have just told him to do what He wanted him to do.

[9 : 46] Because apostolic authority would have been something very significant at this time. If you were to get a letter from one of the apostles like Paul and asking you to do something, it would pretty much take a blatant contradiction to the teachings of Jesus for you not to do it.

And so Paul could have easily said, Look, I'm the apostle here. I have some authority here. You need to do this. But that's not how he approaches this.

That's not how he goes about doing this. In fact, it would have been taken as the word of God for him to do this, but he doesn't want to do that.

He doesn't want to. He says, I don't want you to do this because of who I am. He's saying, I don't want you just to change your actions because of who I am, because I'm asking you to do this. But he says, I want you to change because of who Jesus is. Because of your relationship with Him. You see, to demand that wouldn't be the heart of Paul or the heart of Christ.

[10:49] Because love is foundational to being a follower of Christ. It dictates how we treat one another. In fact, Philemon's name, it meant the loving one. And so what Paul is asking him to do, he's asking him to live up to his name, say, to live up to being who he is called as the loving one.

Paul's asking him to live up to this and let his attitude towards Onesimus be the same as his attitude towards other people in his life. But Paul, once again, is showing his humility by saying, he says, I, Paul, an old man, and now a prisoner also for Christ Jesus.

He's saying, look, I'm doubly helpless. I'm not demanding anything because I'm doubly helpless. I'm an old man now and I'm in prison. And most scholars believe him to be around the age of 60 here. Real old, right? So, you know, of course, you know, somebody told me, I think it might've been clay. Hurt my feelings. He says, you know, you're closer to 60 now than you are 20. And I was like, 20 just seems like it was yesterday.

And so I know this next 20 years is going to go by very quickly as well. But yeah, he, so he's not really that old of a man, but he's lived a hard life. He's experienced a lot in his life and had many difficulties in his life.

[12:09] And so he probably felt his age a lot more than we might today. He says, I'm an old man and I'm in prison. He says, look, I'm not in a position right now that I'm going to demand something of you, but I want to appeal to you.

I want you to ask you to do what is right. So Paul is asking Philemon to show this old man and the prisoner, the difference that Christ has made in his life and to do the right thing.

And Paul in making his appeal, his request out of love is modeling for us an example of humility. You might can force someone to do something they don't want to do for a little while, but God is concerned with far more than right actions, but he's concerned with a right heart.

Jumping down to verse 14 really quickly, he says, but I prefer to do nothing without your consent in order that your goodness might not be by compulsion, but by your own accord.

He says, I didn't want to, I didn't want to ask you in a way that you're going to do it because you feel bad for me or because I'm demanding this. I want you to do this because this is what you want to do.

[13:16] We must first look at our own actions and make sure that we are acting in love as we deal with conflict. One commentator, he put it this way. He says, it's never right to be rude.

It's never right for those who follow Jesus to be arrogant, abrasive, or uncouth. He says, to be called obnoxious for Jesus is not a badge of honor, even if you may be in the right.

And he says, our evangelism would be more effective if we would remember this. And he says, so would our marriages and family life as well. So let us respond to each other within the church, within our families, within our homes, within the workplace, in us with a sense of humility.

And so the next reminder that we see in this passage is something that's, that I would say is difficult at times. And sometimes it's avoided because we try to avoid conflict at all costs.

And while the Bible does promote unity within the church, and it never wants us to, to have conflict for the sake of conflict. That's not a biblical principle that we see in scripture, but it does want us to stand firm on the truth.

[14:29] It does want us to speak up for those who have no voice. And so that's what I want us to see next in this passage is the gospel promotes advocacy.

The gospel promotes advocacy. Listen to Philemon 10 through 14. It says, It says, And so we see advocacy in two ways here.

We advocate for those with no voice, and we advocate for those who may be seen like a lost cause to everyone else. So we advocate for those with no voice, and we advocate for those who others might see as a lost cause.

To begin with, we advocate for those with no voice. We might miss the significance of verse 10 here because of the amount of background that we've given up to this point.

But I don't want you to lose the significance of verse 10. In verse 10, this is the first time that Paul actually uses Onesimus' name in this letter.

[16:00] About halfway through is the first time we see who this letter is about. The whole letter is a plea for Onesimus, but this is the first time that he brings his name up.

And in fact, in the Greek, he doesn't bring his name up until the very end of this sentence. It says, in our translation series, it says, I appeal to you, therefore, my child, Onesimus, whose father I became in my imprisonment.

But in the Greek, it would have been read more along the lines of, I appeal to you for my child, whose father I became in my imprisonment, Onesimus. And so all of a sudden, this buildup to this point, this buildup to his request for who this request is for is significant.

He's saying, I appeal to Paul very graciously and humbly speaks up for Onesimus. Now, Philemon probably had already seen him since Colossians tells us that Onesimus accompanied Tychius in delivering the letter to the Colossian church, which was meeting in Philemon's home.

And so unless he was hiding behind the barn somewhere and trying to figure out how Philemon is going to take this letter, he's probably already seen him. But the significance of what Paul is about to ask him would still have taken him by surprise.

[17:20] David Garland notes, he says, Philemon's culture had conditioned him to view slaves as less than full of slaves. persons who were deservedly consigned to their lot by faith.

And Philemon would have been expected to exact revenge on one who stole away. But Paul is not advocating for him.

But Paul is now advocating for his brother in Christ. He's asking Philemon to not do what is culturally permissible. And also, honestly, what is culturally expected to do.

But in a radical way, show this former slave, show this Onesimus, the radicalness of God's grace in our life.

Don't just, don't just do what is expected. Don't do what everybody's expecting you to do. But in a very radical display of God's grace, bring him in as your brother in Christ.

[18:18] F.F. Bruce describes the significance of this appeal by summarizing his request. He says, He is requesting his friend and convert, Philemon of Colossae, to receive back his slave, Onesimus, on new footing.

No longer as a slave, but a fellow Christian and partner in the service of the gospel, to which Philemon, like Paul himself, is dedicated to. Paul, in his appeal to Philemon, is advocating for his brother in Christ, Onesimus.

Paul, the apostle, one of the key leaders of the early church, the greatest missionary and church planner the world has ever seen, one of the key leaders in the spread of Christianity, in the spread of the church, is now graciously and humbly using his voice to speak up for one who has no voice. Think about the significance of this. Paul is humbling himself. He is one of the greatest missionaries, the greatest leaders of the early church, and he's now using his voice, his position of influence, to speak up for someone who has no voice.

This is what God has called us to do as well. If God has given us a position of authority, if God has given us things, he doesn't just give us those things to use them for ourselves, but he gives them to use for his honor and his glory.

[19:41] And so we are called to use our voice to speak up for those who have no voice. This is what it means to love our neighbor. The mission of God involves speaking up for those who have no voice.

This is a vital part of sharing the gospel. May we never over-spiritualize missions and reduce it to only being concerned about a person's eternity and not what they're going through right now.

Spurgeon pleaded with his congregation when he said these words. He says, Some cannot receive Christ because they are so full of anguish and are so crushed in spirit that they cannot find strength enough of mind to entertain a hope that by any possibility salvation can come to them.

The mere struggle to exist exhausted all of their energy and destroyed all of their hope. I do not wonder that a great many are unable to receive the gospel in the city of ours because their struggle for existence is so awful.

If any of you can do anything to help the toil-worn workers, I pray that you do it. I pray that you do it. Let us do all we can for the weak to alleviate their present suffering and let us do all that we can to tell them of a Savior who made a way where there was no way.

[21:07] Who left heaven and lived the life they couldn't and died the death they deserve so that they now can have new life in Him. Not only do we advocate for those who have no voice, but we

advocate for those who others may see as a lost cause.

He says, Formerly He was useless to you, but now He is indeed useful to you and me. I am sending Him back to you, sending my very heart.

You see, the name Onesimus means useful. And so often slaves would be given this name in hopes that they would live up to their namesake, in hopes that they would be useful. And now there's almost this play on words where He says, Useful was useless.

A useless runaway slave would have seemed like a lost cause to many. It would have seemed like, what's the point in even addressing this? What's the point in even giving Him the time of day?

As we noted last week, Alistair Begg described Him as what would be considered one of the dregs of Roman society. But the reality of the gospel is that we are all lost.

[22 : 16] That we are all lost causes apart from Jesus. But the beauty of the gospel is that with Jesus, there are no lost causes. The beauty of the gospel is that nobody is too far gone.

There's no such thing. In society today, many people fall into two categories. They'll fall into one category of saying, You know what? I think I'm a pretty good person.

And I've lived a pretty good life. And because of that, if you look at my life compared to everybody else's life around me, I'm doing pretty good. And the problem with this is you don't see your need for a Savior.

If you think that you've got this on your own pretty good, that you've got everything under control pretty well, then all of a sudden, you don't see your need for a Savior. If you don't see the significance of your sin, you're not going to see the significance of the cross.

But at the same time, there's a whole other group that in society today that I feel like they're just lost causes. They look at their life and they think about all the ways they've messed up over and over again.

[23 : 25] And they seem to just have this overwhelming sense of sin in their life. And they think, What's the point? God's not going to want this. God's not going to want to do anything with this. But nothing could be further from the truth.

And so we must not find ourselves in either one of these categories. But let us understand that yes, our sin is a big deal. Our sin has separated us from God.

And apart from Christ, we are all lost causes. But because of what Jesus did, because of who He is, what He accomplished on the cross, there's no such thing as a lost cause.

And so if you're here today and you think, Well, I just, there's no way that God would want me. I've messed up too much in my life. There's no way, there's no way that He can bring me back from this. There's no way He would want to bring me back from this. Understand, nothing could be further from the truth. That what God accomplished on the cross can count for you by placing your faith and your trust in Him.

[24 : 26] Ultimately, Paul is asking Philemon to love Onesimus as himself. Love the one that everybody else would have given up on as yourself.

Jesus said, The greatest commandment is, You shall love the Lord your God with all of your heart and with all of your soul and with all of your mind. This is the great and first commandment.

He said, And the second is like it. You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the law and the prophets. You are to love God and you are to love your neighbor as yourself.

This means that every aspect of human existence, every part of us is touched with the gospel. All of a sudden, our priorities are different. We're to love God with all of our heart, soul, and mind.

And we're to love our neighbor as ourself. Carl F.H. Henry once spoke of the evangelical tendency to speak only of the spiritual aspect of mission.

[25 : 27] He said, Only speaking directly to evangelism and not speaking to mercy that people need. He says, This mercy asks the simple question, If I am to love my neighbor as myself, do you minister to yourself in the same way?

He says, Do you refuse to feed yourself because you have the gospel? He said, Do you refuse to clothe yourself because you have the gospel? No, of course not.

So love your neighbor as yourself, your whole self. Advocate for those who have no voice.

Advocate for those that the world would see as lost causes and share the greatest news the world has ever heard.

And so the final reminder that I want us to see from this passage is this. The gospel promotes dependence on God. The gospel promotes dependence on God.

15 and 16, it says this, For this perhaps is why he was parted from you for a while that you may have him back forever. No longer as a bondservant, but more than a bondservant, as a beloved brother, especially to me, but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord.

[26 : 48] Achan makes a powerful observation from this passage. He says, The Roman Empire saw Onesimus as a slave. It saw only with its, with the eyes of the flesh.

Paul, in stark contrast, saw Onesimus as a dearly loved brother. He was now part of a special family, God's family. For Paul, this was especially precious because he saw Onesimus as not only his brother, but as his spiritual son.

Now, for Philemon, the new spiritual status of Onesimus should be much more special. He is getting Onesimus back both on an earthly and a spiritual plane.

Philemon had to see this. He had to rejoice in this. Only the eyes of faith and faith in one crucified like a slave himself could enable Philemon to see things as they were.

Only God can do this. Only God can transform like this. Only God can transform our lives, restoring our broken relationships with Him, but also our broken relationships with one another.

[27 : 59] Only He can do this. And maybe it was because there are so many groups that are studying the book of Esther right now on Wednesday nights in our life groups. But there's a passage, there's a verse that kept coming to mind from the book of Esther as I was reading through this, especially this verse 14 right here or 15 where it says, for this perhaps is why He was parted from you for a while that you may have Him back forever.

See, in Esther 4, 14, it says, Who knows whether you have come to the kingdom for such a time as this? For perhaps this is why He has parted from you for a while that you may receive Him back.

Who knows whether you have come to the kingdom for such a time as this? I love how these verses recognize the sovereignty of God while at the same time humbly recognizing our inability to know.

We don't always know why God has placed people in our lives, but we do know what He's called us to do. We don't always know why God has placed us in different places at different times in our lives.

We don't always know why God has put people in our lives, but what we do know is that God has called us to love. God has called us to love them and point them to the greatest hope this world has ever heard.

[29 : 27] Perhaps God is placing people in your life that you need to do all that you can to point them to the gracious and loving Savior who died on the cross for their sins.

Perhaps God is placing people in your life who desperately need to know the only hope in this life is a relationship with Jesus. Perhaps we need to respond to others in a gracious and humble way, in a way that we see modeled for us throughout Scripture.

Perhaps God is placing people in our life who desperately need to know Him. Perhaps we need to open our eyes to the needs that are around us. Perhaps we need to be more intentional in allowing people into our lives and pointing them to hope.

Perhaps we need to advocate for those who have no voice. Perhaps we need to understand that there are no lost causes. perhaps we need to look at our own lives and realize that we are sinners and that this is a big deal.

And that we recognize that our only hope in this life is a relationship with the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords. The one who left the glory of heaven for us to restore that broken relationship.

[30 : 44] So perhaps we need to look at our lives and see what God is calling us to do in the places that He's called us at this time. Father, we thank You so very much for all that You do for us each and every day.

God, we thank You for this story of Philemon here. A story that reminds us of the mighty ways in which You work in this world. A story that reminds us that we are to approach conflict, that we approach difficulties in the church and in our lives in a humble way, in a humble and gracious way. But Lord, also a story that reminds us that You've called us to speak up for those who have no voice. That You've called us to show hope to those that the world claims are hopeless.

But Lord, we recognize that You and You alone are worthy of our worship. And we recognize that You and You alone are the one that can save. And so Lord, help us to give our lives to You.

And I pray that if there's someone here today that doesn't know You as their Lord and Savior, Lord, that You would burden their hearts, that they would come to You, that they would recognize that yes, we all, apart from Christ, are hopeless, that we can't do this on our own.

[32 : 03] But because of what You accomplished on the cross, because of who You are, there's no such thing as someone who's hopeless. And so Lord, help us to give our lives to You. Help us to follow You in everything that we say and do.

So thank You so much for Jesus and the difference that He makes in our life. And we ask all these things in His name. Amen.