

The Gospel Displayed (Philemon 17-25)

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: 16 November 2025

Preacher: Brett Sanders

[0 : 00] Children, we are ready for Children's Church at this time. You may make your way to the back. See Miss Savannah back there? It's always a joy to see all of those children making their way to the back.

It just warms my heart. I'm so thankful for them. And we also get to celebrate one more child this week. Thank you, Sean, for leading us and stepping in this week. Clay was otherwise occupied. They had their baby this week. Little John David came into the world. And yes, we are so thankful for that. And mom and baby are doing well. Clay is quite the proud dad, as you can imagine. And we know that they're enjoying this special time together with little John David. And so continue to remember them in your prayers. I want to ask you a question this morning.

Have you ever noticed how radical acts of forgiveness are things that catch the world by surprise? Radical acts of forgiveness are things that catch the world by surprise.

[1 : 02] Oftentimes, we see this played out on a large scale, on a national scale, where it makes headlines. For example, 10 years ago, when the family of the victims that were killed at Mother Emanuel Amy Church in Charleston, when this young man walked into a church service on a Wednesday night, killing nine, and they went on and said that they forgive him.

That's something that captures the world by surprise. Or when Erica Kirk stood up at the memorial service for her husband, Charlie, just a couple of months ago, and let those listening know that she forgave the man that took the life of her husband.

These acts of forgiveness are foreign to most in our world today, especially to those who haven't experienced the forgiveness that comes from Christ.

To those who don't understand forgiveness that comes from Christ, this doesn't make sense to people. In our passage today, we see Paul asking Philemon to forgive a runaway slave that most likely stole from him.

And in doing so, it would have been unheard of at this time. In fact, the only explanation would have been a life transformed by the gospel. And so this week, we're going to be finishing our study of the book of Philemon.

[2 : 27] And it's been a fascinating letter detailing the interaction between a runaway slave, a wealthy businessman, and a former Pharisee who at this point is probably the most effective missionary and church planner the world has ever seen.

And we see how the gospel changes everything. In fact, that's been our theme throughout this whole study of the book of Philemon, is that the gospel changes everything. And that's going to continue to be our theme today as we look at these last few verses here.

And so if you have a copy of God's Word, I want to encourage you to open with me to the book of Philemon. We're going to read verses 17 through 25 together. We're going to close out this story. And so if you could make your way for one more week to this short little book, we're going to finish reading this story. It says this, starting in verse 17. It says, 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. 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.

[4 : 00] Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends greetings to you. And so do Mark, Erisarchus, Demas, and Luke, my fellow workers. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.

And so the gospel is illustrated in many different ways in this passage. We've seen it throughout. We've seen how the gospel changes everything. But this week we're going to specifically see some

ways, and we're going to see the gospel illustrated in some very powerful ways as we look at these last few verses here.

And to begin with, I want us to see several ways in which the gospel is displayed. I want us to see several ways the gospel is displayed in this passage.

Often times I will say that I'm not the biggest fan of the phrase, preach the gospel always and when necessary use words. It's not my favorite because a lot of times we think, well that's just an excuse for us not to share our faith.

Not to share the gospel with words, but we'll just say we'll do it with our actions. And to understand the gospel, we need to share it. We need to verbalize it. You don't see people on the news who are standing up and just try to act out the news.

[5 : 12] No, they share the news with you. They speak the news because that's the clearest way of communicating it. And so often times I'm not the biggest fan of this, but that being said, what Paul is asking Philemon to do here is to show a beautiful picture of the gospel in action.

Of the gospel being displayed through action. And what we see is we see several doctrines of the gospel displayed in these verses.

To begin with, we see the gospel doctrine of substitution displayed. The gospel doctrine of substitution displayed in verse 17. It says, so if you consider me your partner, receive him as you would receive me.

Receive him as you would receive me. Now Paul has already spoken of sending back Onesimus as sending his own heart, his very heart.

Now he asks Philemon that he should recognize this through the reception of Onesimus. Paul is hoping that Onesimus would be received in the same manner that he would receive Paul.

[6 : 22] What he's telling Philemon is when you look at Onesimus, don't see a former runaway slave who owes you a great debt. Instead, receive him as you would receive me.

In other words, when you see him, see me. When you see him, don't see a runaway slave who owes you a great debt. See me when you see him.

This is a beautiful illustration of what Christ has done for us. When we give our life to Christ, we're placing our sin on Jesus. And he is placing his righteousness on us.

So when God sees us, he no longer sees our sin and our shame. But rather he sees his son's holy and perfect life that has been placed onto us.

Warren Wiersbe, reflecting on this passage, said it beautifully this way. He says, this to me is an illustration of what Jesus Christ has done for us as believers. God's people are so identified with Jesus Christ that God receives them as he receives his son.

[7 : 27] We are accepted in the beloved and clothed in his righteousness. We certainly cannot approach God with any merit of our own. But God must receive us when we come to him in Jesus Christ.

The word receive in verse 17 means to receive into one's family circle. Imagine a slave entering his master's family.

Imagine the significance of that. But imagine a guilty sinner entering God's family. What a beautiful picture of substitution here.

What a beautiful picture of the gospel on display here. But the next thing that we see, and we continue seeing this, the next doctrine that we see displayed is the gospel doctrine of satisfaction displayed.

The gospel doctrine of satisfaction displayed in verses 18 and 19. If he has wronged you at all or owes you anything, charge that to my account.

[8 : 31] I, Paul, write this with my own hand. I will repay it to say nothing of you owing me even your own self. Paul yet again is giving us an illustration of the gospel.

Yet again, he's showing us a beautiful picture of the doctrine of satisfaction. What he's saying here, Paul tells Philemon to put Onesimus' debt on his account.

Whatever he owes, he says, charge it to me. Make it so that Onesimus doesn't owe a thing. To make it very clear, Paul emphasizes how serious he is. He says, I, Paul, write this with my own hand.

I will repay it. You know, many times people think why Paul had somebody else write his letters for him. Most of the time he had somebody else, a scribe, who would write his letters for him.

And a lot of times at the end of the letter he would write something with his own hand to show that he is the author of this, that he's writing this. Now we don't exactly know, but many people have guessed that possibly the reason being is because Paul had poor eyesight.

[9 : 40] And they get this from his Damascus Road experience when he was going to, on the Damascus Road experience, and he was blinded when Christ appeared to him.

And he was blinded for three days or a few days. And then after that time he met Ananias. And then it says something like scales fell off of his eyes. And many people believe that, yes, he did regain his sight there, but it was never fully back from that point forward.

And a lot of people, now there are many guesses as to what Paul's thorn in the flesh is, but many suspect that it could be poor eyesight. And so oftentimes he would have somebody else write these letters for him, and then you would see a very different handwriting towards the end of it.

And in fact, at the end of Galatians, it talks about how large that he has to write these letters, how large these letters are. And all of a sudden you're able to see a very different style of handwriting. It would be kind of like, I don't know if you've seen Marilyn, our financial secretary, if you've ever seen her. She has the most beautiful handwriting I've ever seen. She can write calligraphy as fast as I can just write anything.

[10 : 49] And so she has this beautiful handwriting. You know, it would be like her writing something and then say, all right, well, let me put my chicken scratch on here at the end and show you that I'm the one who's writing this. And so what Paul is saying, he's emphasizing the fact that this is me who's saying this.

I want you to understand this. Whatever he owes you, put it on to my account. Charge it to me. Paul is emphasizing that this is his personal guarantee that he will cover whatever debt Onesimus has. Then in a stroke of brilliance, Paul says, to say nothing of you owing me even your own life. Paul is saying, I'm not going to bring up the fact that I brought you to the Lord.

I'm not going to bring up the fact that I shared Christ with you and that you're now a believer because of the testimony that I shared with you. But in not bringing it up, what has he just done? He's brought it up.

And so he's saying, look, I'm not going to bring up the fact that you owe me your own life, that you owe me so much more. He's reminding him that what he's asking him to do for Onesimus is small compared to what Paul, by the grace of God, has been able to do for him.

[12 : 02] In saying that he will be responsible for whatever debt Onesimus has, Paul is giving us a beautiful picture of the gospel doctrine of satisfaction.

You see, oftentimes we have a tendency to downplay certain aspects of the cross. Now there's parts that we like to highlight, that we like to make a really big deal about.

We like to highlight God's love, his mercy, his grace. But oftentimes we skip over the justice and the wrath that is also displayed on the cross.

The cross, I believe, is one of the clearest pictures of all of God's attributes and characteristics coming together at the same time. We do clearly see his love, his mercy, his grace on display, but we also see his justice and his wrath.

You see, God is love and his grace and mercy are perfect, but he is also perfect in his justice, meaning that a price has to be paid for sin.

[13 : 08] He can't just forgive sin without a price being paid for because that would be a contradiction to his justice. He's perfect in his justice, and so a price has to be paid.

What Jesus is doing on the cross in an infinitely greater way than Paul is doing for Onesimus is saying, Father, put Brett's sin on me.

Put what he has done wrong onto my account. Whatever wrong he has done, he says, charge that to my account. This is the beautiful picture of satisfaction that God fully satisfies.

Our sin debt that we can never afford on our own, that we can never repay, that he fully satisfies it on the cross. He pays for those sins past, present, and future on the cross.

Jerry Bridges beautifully explains this when he says, I believe a word that forcefully captures the essence of Jesus' work of propitiation is the word exhausted.

[14 : 12] Jesus exhausted the wrath of God. It was not merely deflected or prevented from reaching us. It was exhausted.

Jesus bore the full, unmitigated brunt of it. God's wrath against sin was unleashed in all of its fury on his beloved son.

He held nothing back. Let that sink in for a moment. Yes, what Paul is asking Philemon to do is significant. But it's nothing in light of what Christ has already done for him. It's nothing in light of what Christ has already done for him. Finally, we see the gospel doctrine of reconciliation displayed here.

Philemon 20, it says, Yes, brother, I want some benefit from you in the Lord. Refresh my heart in Christ. Paul says, I do want some benefit from you.

[15:13] I want you to refresh my heart in Christ. Does anybody's version right here have a word other than heart right here in their translation? Just curious.

Does anybody's? Okay, we have one right here that's different. It's probably bowels. And it's interesting because the Greek word for heart is actually not what's used here.

That would be cardia, which is where we get cardiology from. But the word that's used here is actually referring more to the bowels. And so he's saying, refresh my inner parts.

He says, refresh who I am on the inside. Think about it this way. If you've ever, for some of us, it may have been a long time ago when we played a competitive sport. But right before you go out and walk on the field of a game, right before kickoff, what do you sometimes feel right here in your stomach?

You feel butterflies, right? And so you don't feel it up here in your heart. You feel it down here in your stomach. So when people would talk about this feeling that they had inside them, they would refer more to it in their bowels, in their gut.

[16:17] And so what we're seeing here is Paul is looking for Philemon to refresh his heart in a tangible way, in a way that he can feel it on the inside.

The refreshment that Paul is after is reconciliation. Is Paul asking for Onesimus' freedom here? Possibly. Is he asking for Philemon to return Onesimus to him in Rome?

Maybe. Many believe that's what Paul was hoping for, especially from what he said in verses 13 and 14, where he said, It seems like Paul would like a partner in the ministry here.

It seems like that he hopes that Philemon would send Onesimus back to him. So personally, I think Paul is asking for Onesimus' release and for him to be able to return to him in Rome.

Now, this is what everyone has been asking here. The question that everyone's been asking, you know, does Philemon receive Onesimus back as a brother in Christ? Does he grant this petition?

[17:36] Everybody wants to know that question. Well, the text doesn't answer this question for us, but I think there is a high probability and we can assume with great confidence that he did.

I say this because if he didn't, Philemon would probably try to do everything he can to destroy this letter, right? He wouldn't want it to be released. He wouldn't want us to be reading about this later on.

If Philemon had hardened his heart and didn't, I feel like he would have destroyed evidence of this letter so that no one would think poorly of them. Further, historical evidence suggests this as well, that he did release him.

Kent Hughes notes, he says, 50 years later, when Ignatius, one of the great Christian martyrs, was being transported from Antioch to Rome to be executed, he wrote letters to certain churches.

In writing to Ephesus, he praised their bishop Onesimus, even making the same Pauling pun on his name. And it appears likely that Onesimus, the runaway slave, had become with the passing years the great bishop of Ephesus.

[18:45] This is one of the great stories of the gospel and the church, a jewel in her crown. So it seems most likely that reconciliation did happen. It seems most likely that what Paul was asking came to fruition here.

And so as we think about these three aspects of the gospel on display, this substitution, this satisfaction, this reconciliation, I want you to honestly answer a question for me today.

Are these doctrines true of your life? In other words, have you placed your faith and your trust in Jesus? Because if you have, then when God looks at your life, he doesn't see you as an enemy, but he sees you as a child.

If this is true of your life, then when he sees you, he sees your sins, past, present, and future, completely and fully paid for.

When he sees you, he sees a once broken relationship restored. Our only hope in life is trusting in Jesus to do what we couldn't do on our own.

[19 : 59] And so if you haven't done that this morning, then please, don't leave here without talking to someone. If that means coming down after the service and stepping out and saying, and coming down as we have a song of invitation at the end of the service, if that means coming down at that time, then I encourage you to do it.

If that means finding one of the pastors after the service and to say, hey, I need to have a conversation with you, then do it. If that means finding a close friend or maybe a family member that you came here with today and say, hey, today, I need to give my life to Jesus. I need to go all in and say, there's nothing that I can do on my own to save me, and I need to be fully dependent on Jesus to do that. And then all of a sudden, these beautiful doctrines that are on display here, this substitution, this satisfaction, this reconciliation, are now true of your life before God.

And so as we look at the aspects of the gospel displayed, it naturally brings us to our next observation. So the next thing that we see in this passage is the confidence in the gospel displayed. We see that Paul, and we see that Onesimus, had a great confidence in the gospel, and it was displayed here. Verses 21 and 22, it says, confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say.

[21 : 30] 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. These two verses give us some wonderful instruction when it comes to practical theology, when it comes to putting our theology into practice, to showing us how to encourage others to live out their faith, how to motivate them to be generous with their lives, how to show hospitality and neighbor love in a way that is evident of the gospel's transformation in our life.

And we've already mentioned that Paul and Onesimus' great confidence in the gospel to change Philemon's heart. Paul is encouraging Philemon to do the right thing and that he's confident that he will not only do what Paul asked, but he says he's confident that he'll do even more than he asked. One pastor paraphrased this verse and said that Paul was essentially saying, I know you well enough that you'll probably do even more than what I'm asking you to do.

I know you well enough. I know that the gospel has taken root in your life that you're probably not only going to do just what I'm asking you to do, you're probably going to take it up a notch. You're probably going to do even more than I'm asking because I'm confident of the gospel's transformation in your life. I'm confident that the gospel transforms you in radical ways so that you're going to do even more than what I'm asking you to do.

[23 : 05] The gospel really does change us in powerful ways. Many times it does so in ways that are foreign to those who don't know Jesus. I want to share a story with you to help you understand a love that can only come from God, a changed heart that can only come from a right relationship with God.

And it's the story that actually happened during the Revolutionary War. There was a preacher of the gospel by the name of Peter Miller. He lived near a fellow who hated him intensely for his Christian life and his testimony.

In fact, this man hated him so much that the man violently opposed him and ridiculed his followers. And then one day, the unbeliever was found guilty of treason and sentenced to death.

This unbeliever who had ridiculed and made fun of and violently opposed Peter Miller and his followers, he was found guilty of treason and sentenced to death.

Hearing about this, Peter Miller set out on foot to intercede on the man's behalf before General George Washington. The general listened to the minister's earnest plea, but he told him that he didn't feel that he should pardon his friend.

[24 : 23] He said, my friend? He's not my friend, answered Miller. He said, in fact, he's my worst living enemy.

He's not my friend at all. In fact, he's my worst living enemy. George Washington was like, what? You walked 60 miles to save the life of your enemy?

That, in my judgment, puts the matter in different light. I will grant your request. And so with the pardon in hand, Miller hastened to the place where his neighbor was to be executed.

And when he arrived, just as the prisoner was walking to the scaffold, when the traitor saw Miller, he exclaimed, old Peter Miller has come to see his revenge and watched me hang.

But he was astonished as he watched the minister step out of the crowd and produce a pardon that saved his life. This is the kind of confidence that we can have in the gospel to change lives.

[25 : 29] It allows us to forgive because we've been forgiven of so much more than we will ever be asked to forgive. It allows us to see the world in a different light.

It allows us to forgive in ways that the world doesn't understand because we recognize that we will never be asked to forgive more than we have already been forgiven in Christ.

This is the confidence that we see on display in the gospel. As we have fellowship with one another, we take great confidence in how the gospel changes our lives and the way that we interact with one another.

The final observation that I want us to bring our attention to in this passage is this. And what we see here in the last few verses is partnerships in the gospel displayed.

We see partnerships in the gospel displayed. Verses 23 through 25 says, Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ, Jesus, sends greetings to you and so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke, my fellow workers.

[26 : 35] The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. God saves us individually, one at a time. He saves us personally, one at a time, but he did not save us to live this life on our own.

He saved us for community. He saved us for mutual accountability, encouragement, and life. He gave us a spiritual family to walk through life with us and we need faithful people in our lives who will push us, who will be there for us, to encourage us, to follow God even during the difficult times. We need those people in our lives to encourage us, to push us, to keep us accountable so that we can live this life on mission for God.

Paul would often list out those who were with him as he closes the letter and in doing so, especially in this case, Paul, in a sense, is saying that this isn't just coming from him to Philemon, but it's also coming from Epaphras, from Mar, from Aristarchus, from Demas, and Luke.

And so when we look at these people and we look at those who are walking with him, we need gospel community and gospel partners like you see here. He's saying Epaphras greets you.

[27 : 56] Oh, well, Epaphras was from Colossae, so he would have been very familiar with Philemon, but we also see that he was a prisoner alongside Paul. And he says, Mark greets you, which is significant because this is John Mark, author of the gospel that bears his name.

And if you remember from Acts, this Mark is also the one who didn't continue on the missionary journey with Paul. In fact, it made Paul pretty upset when he turned back and caused a pretty strong division between Paul and Barnabas, but now we see how this relationship has been restored.

Now he was, again, like on this, he was formerly useless to Paul, but now he's useful to him in the service of the kingdom. You see Aristarchus, who was a close friend to Paul and traveled with him to Rome.

In Colossians, it calls him a fellow prisoner. He also mentions Demas here. Now, Demas is mentioned three times, here and in Colossians, both in positive light, but then in Paul's last letter to 2 Timothy, where he's writing to Timothy, he says that Demas has now left him.

He said he's already gone because since he loved this present world. And so as we think about that, we're reminded of the importance of not only starting well in our ministry and what God has called us to do, not only continuing well, but also finishing well what God has called us to.

[29 : 23] But finally, he mentions Luke, Paul's beloved physician. Dr. Luke is the one who wrote both Luke and Acts. And if you just take those two as the only books of the Bible that he wrote, although there's a really strong case that he also wrote the book of Hebrews, but if you just look at the fact that he wrote Luke and Acts, this Luke right here that is traveling with Paul wrote the single biggest contributor to the New Testament when you look at the amount of volume that was produced.

And so what you have here are faithful workers of the gospel who are walking alongside Paul. And in saying this, he's saying this is carrying a lot of weight to include them here.

Dr. Akin notes the significance of concluding the letter with this. He says, These men then stood with Paul on behalf of Onesimus. Paul knew that they were faithful and trustworthy, and so did Philemon.

And so their vote in favor of Onesimus would have carried significant weight. And then Paul ends the letter in the same way that he began this letter, with the ultimate partnership, and that is in

Christ Jesus.

He says, The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. In other words, let what Christ has done for you guide your heart.

[30 : 48] But the your here is plural, meaning that it probably would have been understood as the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with you, Philemon, yes, but also with your household, and also with the whole church for that matter.

This is how God has called us to live our lives, in light of the grace of God. The grace of God, the gospel, it changes our lives in ways that can't otherwise be explained.

It brings people together like a missionary, a wealthy man, and a runaway slave. The gospel restores what sin destroys. The gospel restores what sin destroys, first and foremost, our relationship with God, but it doesn't stop there.

It restores broken relationships. It forgives in radical ways. It prompts generous giving of our time and our resources, and it causes us to build gospel partnerships so that we can work together to reach the lost and dying in the world.

The gospel really does change everything. So has it changed your life? Has the gospel changed your life?

[32 : 04] Have you given your life to Jesus? If not, then I encourage you, don't leave here today without doing that.

Because not only does the gospel change your relationship with God, not only does it satisfy what the law demands, not only do we get this substitution, not only do we get to see this reconciliation taking place in our life, not only does it change our relationship with our Heavenly Father, but it also changes everything else.

So has the gospel changed your life today? Father, thank you so very much for all that you do for us each and every day. Thank you for this book of Philemon where we clearly get to see the gospel explained, but also we get to see how the gospel is applied to our life.

And so Lord, I pray that as we read this, we wouldn't just see this as a fascinating story that we put back on a bookshelf when we're finished, but we'll see this as your word that is living and active, that it's in here to change our lives, to point us to the fact that the gospel still changes in incredible ways.

And so Lord, I pray that if there's someone here today that has never given their life to you, that you would change their life in the most radical way possible of taking them from death to life, taking them from being an enemy to a child, from an eternity spent apart from you in hell to an eternity spent with you in heaven.

[33 : 40] So Lord, I pray that you change their life in that way. But I also pray that it wouldn't stop there, that we would let the gospel come into our lives and change everything about us.

And so Lord, I pray that for each of us that have already given our life to you, that we would continue to let the gospel change and mold and guide us in powerful ways.

And that we'll do this within the context of gospel community. That we'll have brothers and sisters in Christ who will come alongside us and encourage us to follow you even in those difficult times.

And so God, thank you so very much for Jesus and the difference that he still makes today. And we ask all this in his precious name. Amen.