

Gospel Transgressions: Embracing with Grace

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[0 : 00] Last Sunday I introduced a term from US politics called gerrymandering. To gerrymander means to create a voting district that favors the party that's in power.

The party in power gets to redraw those districts. And it's legal, but it's not often very ethical. As one person has said, it's really the politicians choosing their voters rather than voters choosing their politicians.

But it happens. And what that does is it creates a favorable condition for the person who is in charge. That they're the ones who control the narrative as it were. So gerrymandering is an exercise in that, of control.

It's a process whereby those who are in power remain in power. And I went on to say that Christians cannot gerrymander. That is, whatever the role gerrymandering plays in politics, we cannot as Christians engage in a practice that keeps us from dealing with the world around us. If we're going to be agents of reconciliation, as we have been called to be, we must have the ability to see how sin creates self-promoting, self-protecting boundaries and be willing to transgress them.

[1 : 21] Now, when gerrymandering shows up in a church, how it can express itself is that we express itself with a kind of an unwillingness, a discomfort in engaging people that are different than us.

That we think our religious scruples say we should have nothing to do with. But what that does is it allows us to create a walk of faith that keeps us in control.

Relationships that favor us. But as Jesus says that we are to love God with all of our heart, soul, strength and mind and our neighbor as ourselves, and we learn that we really have no control over who our neighbor is, then what we need to do is be ready, be ready to cross those boundaries. What I've called gospel transgression. The gospel pressing us to cross those sin-created boundaries in order that we might bring life.

And we've considered that so far, of how Jesus did that in our first message, of how we sat down with tax collectors and sinners, people who were considered inherently sinful by the Pharisees.

[2 : 29] And yet he says what? Go read what the prophet says, I desire mercy and not sacrifice. I didn't come for the righteous, but for the unrighteous. So he pulled up a chair and he sat down with tax collectors and sinners.

And then last evening we considered how it was that the apostle Peter was pressed by the Holy Spirit to transgress the boundary of Jew and Gentile to go to the house of Cornelius.

And in that whole process he discovered about himself that he had considered Gentiles like unclean animals on the sheet that was shown him. And he found out, he said, God has shown me I must call no one common or unclean.

And see, the gospel transgression caused him to rehumanize these people and caused him to cross a boundary that society said you don't cross. That his religious group will say you don't cross. But that's the nature of gospel transgression. We cross over boundaries. And this morning we're going to consider the boundary of power and of class.

[3 : 34] Let's pray first. Gracious God, we need your help to stay true to your word, to understand what you ask of us, that we might be faithful to live it out.

And live it out and experience what you call us to, Lord, to walk with Jesus. And to that end I pray in Jesus' name. Amen. Now I know there's a lot of people here who play golf, I'm sure.

Yeah, I play golf. Well, I go to a golf course. I carry my clubs. I put them on a cart because I can't walk. And I hit a ball. Whether you call what I do golf or not, that's up to you.

But I know that there are people who do play golf. And you know a professional golfer is allowed only 14 clubs in the bag. You can't have more than that. 14 clubs. You can have less, I suppose.

But you can't have more than 14. And if you're not a golfer, the deal is you have 14 clubs because each one of those clubs represents a different thing that it can do for you. I mean the whole idea is you just stand in one spot and you're trying to hit a tiny little ball about 200 yards, 300, 400, 500, 550 yards out there.

[4 : 42] And they give you so many strokes with which to do that. How many times you can hit the ball. And the whole point is that that ball, when you hit it, you're going to use a different club to do different things.

To get you from the starting point to a good way down the way, the fair way. And then eventually you want to get it on to the green. You usually have a club that kind of lifts up the ball and gets it on. And then once you're on the green, you have something that's really charming called a putter. You think about puttering around. Well, that's what I do on a green because I'll hit the ball, it goes by the hole, I go back the other way. I play what's called military golf. Left, right, left, right. Well, the point of having all of those clubs is that they're there to help you to accomplish your task. And to do that, because even professional golfers, at the top of their game, they'll still hit the ball. Left, they'll hook it, they'll slice it, they'll put it in a pond. And when they do that too often, you know, they don't get to play. Come Sunday or Saturday morning on a four day a week, four days tournament.

[5 : 42] So it takes an enormous amount of practice to do it. An enormous amount of practice. Now, what we've been calling gospel transgressions. The gospel is going to deeply test our faith.

And in such circumstances, if you'll allow the metaphor, we need to be ready to use every club in the bag. This is Paul's prayer for his friend Philemon.

As Paul, for all intents and purposes, sets him up for a gospel transgression. And he's going to deeply test Philemon's faith. The letter to Philemon is a personal appeal from the apostle to one who is his spiritual child.

That is, from the contents of the letter, we learn that Paul was used of God to bring Philemon into the kingdom. From the letter, we learn that a man named Onesimus, who was a slave in Philemon's household, had fled the household.

Now, the reason for his leaving is not explicitly spoken of, but it appears that he had perhaps stolen something, or at the very least, caused enough of a problem in the household that he feared punishment from his master.

[6 : 52] There's a little play on words here in the Greek. The term Onesimus, the name Onesimus means useful. And we learn later on that Paul intimates, he understands that he was pretty useless.

But Onesimus, at one point in this letter, we learn, has met the apostle Paul. So, here you've got a fellow whose name is useful, and more than likely he wasn't terribly useful, and so he was probably not a profitable servant, and he very well might have suffered often at the hands of his master.

But in this time of being away from Philemon's household, Onesimus meets with the apostle Paul. Now, what are the circumstances of this meeting? Where did it happen?

Well, we learn from the letter that Paul is in prison. So, most commentators suggest he's either in Rome, or he's in Ephesus. And some people think he's writing from Rome, and that Philemon made it all the way to Rome, and happened to come upon Paul.

Or that he made it down to Ephesus, which is about 100 miles away. I'm going to suggest that that's probably the case. See, it appears that Onesimus, having fled the household, knew that he was in serious trouble.

[8 : 08] He knew that the apostle Paul was a friend of Philemon, and he went to him and appealed that he would intervene for him. See, there's actually a Roman law, a practice, called the *amicus domini*, which means a friend of his master.

And so, what Philemon is taking advantage of, Onesimus is taking advantage of, is going to Paul, who is an *amicus domini*, to appeal for him to Philemon.

And what that does is places Paul precisely in the place that he likes to be, as an agent of reconciliation. Remember what he writes in 2 Corinthians.

I think if you want to define Paul's ministry, it is a ministry of reconciliation.

Now, what's fascinating, what's extraordinary, and certainly totally unexpected by Philemon, is that Paul leads Onesimus to Christ.

[9 : 24] He's therefore a new creation. See, Onesimus came seeking help from Paul to be reconciled to Philemon, and Paul is used to cause Onesimus to be reconciled to God.

And it will be this fact that provides the primary fuel for Paul to make this extraordinary plea to Philemon on behalf of Onesimus.

Now, this letter is a remarkable piece of writing. Its rhetorical skill is evident. But what is striking is how revolutionary, how revolutionary the view of the world is, given the historical context in which it was written.

And T. Wright says this, If we had no other first century evidence for the movement that came to be called Christianity, this letter ought to make us think. Something is going on here.

Something is different. What Paul says in this letter, people don't say this sort of thing. This isn't how the world works. A new way of life is being attempted. New, looked at things in a new way, trying out a new path.

[10:29] Now, this new path is one that leads a believer to gospel transgression. The transgressing of boundaries that exist due to societal expectations, religious scruples.

This short letter of Paul offers a powerful example of the life-shaping implications of the death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus for those who have been united to Jesus by faith.

And what I hope to transmit, to show, is how the gospel, as a transgressive force in our fallen world, challenges the boundaries set up by the expectations, the ethics, the ideologies, the practices of the world.

And when we follow Jesus across those boundaries, we discover the riches of our faith. It's in times of testing that we have the opportunity to explore just what clubs we have in the bag.

The beginning of this letter is a total setup by Paul to challenge Philemon to experience gospel transgression. It's going to cost Philemon something.

[11:38] But that should come as no surprise. Jesus told us to count the cost. Let's look at these opening verses. Verses 1 through 3, Paul greets the recipients.

Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy, our brother, to Philemon, to Aphia, to Archippus, and to the church that is in your house. And he says this, grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Let's highlight a couple of things. The offer of grace and peace is for everyone that he mentions, but the letter is written to Philemon. That becomes evident as the letter unfolds.

And though this language of grace and peace at the opening is present in every one of the greetings in Paul's letters, given what he's going to ask Philemon, it is most appropriate.

In 4 through 4 through 7, he commends Philemon for his faith and love for Jesus and for all the saints, he says. And in fact, this generous love is something that brings Paul joy.

[12:41] Now, in commending Philemon, he tells how he is praying for him. 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, Paul uses a very important term. It's translated in the ESV as sharing. The Greek term is *koinonia*, and it's a word you may have heard.

When he says sharing your faith, he's not talking about evangelism. He's not talking about handing out tracts. He's not talking about sitting down and talking to somebody about Jesus. What he's talking about is the fellowship, the association, the community, the communion, the joint participation that Christians have with each other.

In fact, it's a term related to the description of the church in Acts 2 and 4, having all things in common. Now, for Philemon, it speaks to the participation of Philemon with other believers.

They are all members of the same society, the entity called the body of Christ, the bride of Christ. And so by sharing that is meant the mutual love and support that is called for, for fellow believers.

[13:54] As the Venerable Matthew Henry says, when we take God for our God, we take his people for our people. See, Paul appreciates the *koinonia* that Philemon has with the other members of the body of Christ.

Clearly, Philemon is a generous, well-loved, loving member of the church in Colossae and of the greater body. He has been a support to the apostle and other believers.

But Philemon's *koinonia* is about to undergo a test. Paul is going to ask Philemon to commit gospel transgression.

To congress societal conventions regarding the treatment of slaves and receive Onesimus back into his home. And to do so no longer as one considered as an inferior class or destined for punishment, but as a fellow believer.

In fact, he's asking him to extend to Onesimus the koinonia that he has been sharing in with other believers. In fact, in verse 17, he asked him to receive him as though it was the apostle Paul himself.

[15:00] If you consider me your partner, he says in verse 17, same term. If you consider me your partner, receive him as you would receive me. Now, I said I was going to, Paul was going to ask Philemon to commit gospel transgression.

What is the cultural, societal relationship between Philemon and Onesimus? As a slave, Onesimus is Philemon's property.

Slavery was the engine of the Roman Empire. One commentator notes, Although slavery existed in most society as far back as records have been found, the Greeks and Romans transformed slavery into something new and wholly original in the world history.

Namely, an institutionalized system of large-scale employment of slave labor in both the countryside and the cities. This ancient system of slavery was fully developed and stabilized as an institution by the second century BC.

Slavery was the engine, the economic engine of the Roman society. It was an integral part of Roman society. And the status of a slave in Rome, Well, it wasn't the same as what we think of, or at least Americans think of, dealing with the slavery that took place in the United States back in the, prior to the Civil War.

[16:20] And yet the slave was still the property of the one who was owned. As such, it's told that according to the law, a slave was a thing, a chattel to be owned, bought and sold.

As such a person in slavery could not contract a legal marriage, represent himself in court or inherit. Slaves were not regarded as having any kin and were often subject to more severe punishments than their owners for the same criminal acts.

It was, of course, recognized that those in slavery, as many as one-third of the population of the large cities, were human beings, if not legal persons. As such, they were protected by law against severe cruelty from their owners or from others.

See, it was different than what took place in the U.S., so much so that there seemed to be a level of humanity involved, but they're still considered persons. But slaves could not own property.

Slaves could own property, and they could be in positions of influence in households and teachers. But, nonetheless, they were still property. And Roman law expected slaves to be obedient and subject to their masters.

[17:29] And if they weren't, penalties could be meted out. In fact, if Onesimus fled, having stolen, he could be subject to the penalty of death. And here is Paul, having sent this letter, most likely, as we learn from the letter to the Colossians, which arrived at the same time, most likely by the hand of the very one he is advocating for.

And a letter that is addressed not just to Philemon, but also to the whole church that meets in his house, asking him to be received back into the fellowship as though he were receiving Paul himself. And perhaps even hinting that Philemon set Onesimus free so that he could return back to Paul and serve him. See, this is the challenge. This is the test for Philemon's faith.

And what has Paul been praying? He has prayed that in this experience of gospel transgression, Philemon will seize the opportunity to really understand and examine koinonia.

That he would discover and utilize the resources available to him because Christ is in him. Now, this might come easy for us to sort of think about here in the 21st century.

[18:42] That is, that slavery is no longer here. We'll talk a little bit more about that in a little bit later. But for our brother Philemon, this was no small test of his faith. The commentator acknowledges he will lose faith in the community if he capitulates to a runaway slave.

Philemon might have been a figure of some stature in the wider society, and he will forfeit standing if he becomes known as one soft on slavery. He must also bear the financial cost of freeing a slave and cope with possibly throwing his whole household into an uproar by his extreme leniency.

The right decision requires an extraordinary exercise of faith, love, and knowledge. See, you could see why Paul was praying as he was for his friend.

This was a test. One that he knew Philemon, if pressed into, would cause him to discover the resources available to him in Christ. The club's in the bag, if you will.

Slavery and all societal ills are a product of sin. And the Christian has been redeemed, rescued by God, to be a transgressive force in the midst of a sinful world.

[19 : 55] And what Paul is showing us through this request to Philemon is that the church is the laboratory of these changes, as we are tested to confront the gerrymandering in ourselves and, by extension, in the world around us.

J.C. Rowell says, we should always regard communion with other believers as an eminent means of grace. A way in which we ourselves are transformed.

So imagine this now. Philemon's slave runs away. And Philemon's thinking, where did that useless guy go? Onesimus, what a name, what a joke.

He was just useless. Where did he go? And the next thing you know, Onesimus is knocking on his door. And what he's got is a letter from the Apostle Paul.

So Philemon takes the letter. He opens it up. He reads it. He looks at Onesimus. And he's supposed to now welcome him as a full-blown brother in Christ.

[20 : 59] He's supposed to embrace him as he would the Apostle Paul. That's extraordinary. The confrontation of these two separate sets of values meeting against one another.

The mores of the Roman society. The expectations of the kingdom of God. Ramming up against each other. And what is Paul asking Philemon to do? I want you to find out what's available to you. So that you can really understand what it means to be a member of the body of Christ. I'm so grateful for how you expressed Koinonia. And now you have a real opportunity to extend it to the fullest.

Well, what are the resources? What are the clubs in the bag? Let's turn to that passage in 2 Peter for a moment.

Because it's there in this wonderful passage. That it really tracks with the same expectation that Paul is asking of Philemon.

[22 : 01] I'm going to read this passage very quickly again. His divine power is granted to us. Listen. Granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness. Through the knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and excellence.

He's granted to us his precious and very great promises. So that through them you may become partakers of the divine nature. Having escaped from the corruption that's in the world because of sinful desire. For this very reason make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue or excellence.

And virtue with knowledge. And knowledge and self-control. Self-control with steadfastness. Steadfastness with godliness. And godliness with brotherly affection. And brotherly affection with love. For listen. For if these qualities are yours and are increasing.

They keep you from being ineffective or unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. What did Paul pray for Philemon? 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.

See Peter's list is not a list of moral qualities that we're to strive to achieve. Proving that we're a good Christian. This is what is available to us. It is in us because we are in Christ.

[23 : 10] And Christ is in us. His divine power is granted a gift of grace to all things that pertain to life and godliness. So what does Peter say to his readers?

Supplement. Fill out your faith with virtue, knowledge, self-control, godliness, steadfastness, brotherly affection, love. They're all in the bag to use. Now let's think of Philemon.

How would he supplement his faith? Paul acknowledges he's a beloved brother in Christ. So how would Peter's teaching help him in that moment when Onesimus shows up at his door with that letter?

Knowledge. Knowledge. He knows who Jesus is. He knows why he came, what he accomplished. He knows that he sat with tax collectors and sinners. Self-control.

Would Philemon need self-control at that moment when the door opens up and there's Onesimus? See he would have been perfectly justified in his fellow Romans eyes if he would have taken his hand back and smack him across the face, grab him by the collar and throw him out.

[24 : 09] But he has to remember about what Jesus said when he stood on the cross. Father forgive them for they know not what they do. When reviled he did not revile back.

And what a steadfastness. If he receives Onesimus back into his household, he's going to have to hold fast. When the pressures come from within that household and outside of that household, the kind of steadfastness he's going to need to walk in that new life that's in Christ, it's going to be huge.

And then what about godliness? That is, his god-likeness has to be evident in that moment. He has an old self and he has a new self, does Philemon. The old self he's supposed to put off, the new self he's supposed to put on.

The new man is being shaped into what? Into the image of Christ. He needs to pursue godliness in that moment. And of course, brotherly affection. He needs to learn what that means.

His relationship with Onesimus is radically altered. Paul says this, Perhaps it's why he was parted from you for a while that you might receive him back forever, no longer as a bondservant, but more than a bondservant, a beloved brother.

[25 : 19] And lastly of all, it's going to be grounded in love. A love that is supposed to reflect the love that Philemon himself would desire. See, these are the resources available to Philemon in this moment of transgression.

And what would the result be? Can you imagine the next meeting when that church gathers in Philemon's house and they're having communion? And there's Onesimus sitting among everybody else.

Philemon goes over, sits down next to him. And when the bread is passed, and as often as in some communities, they'll break off a bread and said, the body of Christ broken for you. Philemon takes the bread, breaks it off, gives it to Onesimus.

The body of Christ broken for you. When the cup comes by, Philemon takes it, drinks, turns to Onesimus. The blood of Christ shed for you.

That would have been a radical moment for those two men. For all the people in the room and in time for the entire Roman society.

[26 : 21] See, I said a golfer, a golfer to take these clubs and put the ball where he needs to, it requires a lot of practice. And that's why Peter says, be the more diligent to confirm your calling and lecture.

If you practice these qualities, you will never fail. In situations such as Philemon is confronted with, there's an opportunity for him to exercise his faith. Puritan William Gurnall says, we live by faith and faith lives by exercise.

When God brings us into these times and our boundaries are tested, he's using us to test the boundaries of the fallen world as well. He's saying, listen, you have the resources to meet the challenge.

I'll give you the grace to do it. I've already provided you with enough through the presence of the Holy Spirit. The life of Christ dwelling in you, the resources are there. Take the club out of the bag, the right club, hit the ball and put it in the hole.

Now I don't know Scotland well enough to suggest any equivalencies with the relationship of master and slave, if they could even be made. By the grace of God, we no longer have slavery as a legally protected practice.

[27 : 29] But what we can do is look at the dynamics of the relationship. Philemon is in a position of power. He's in a position to call the shots. He's the one with respectability and community. Onesimus is the one who is without power in the relationship.

He's also the one who's considered to have done something wrong, which I think we have every right to believe he has. But relationships are always two-way. It's not indicated what part Philemon might have played, if any.

We don't know that. What we do understand from this account is that the gospel has brought Philemon and Onesimus on the same level. Paul says elsewhere that in Christ there is neither slave nor free.

All are made in the image of God. All fall short of the glory of God. All like sheep have gone astray. All must come through the narrow way. All who believe have Christ as their head.

All partake of the wine and the bread. Those truths applies to these two men. And it was why Paul requested Philemon receive Onesimus no longer as a bondservant, but as a beloved brother.

[28 : 30] I don't know how to make application to this. But to suggest personally, you might find yourself in a situation similar to this one, in which to embrace with grace the one who is offended could make you look weak or indulgent in other people's eyes.

It might mean that you have to take the risk to give someone another chance. That you might have to give up your power or privilege and grant power to the one who has no power or privilege.

Societally, what do we think? You can think of William Wilberforce. Right? He fought slavery for 20 years and the bill that he fought for finally passed three days before he died.

Brotherly love, affection, endurance, self-control. All of those things were Wilberforce's.

Contemporarily, one of the ways that the power dynamic can manifest itself is when experts come up with a solution to cure a societal ill.

For instance, poverty. I don't know if you're familiar with this fellow or this book, Poverty Safari by Darren McGarvey. I remember that one of these two of you. He grew up in the schemes. He grew up in poverty.

[29 : 39] He makes no excuses for his behavior or for the behavior of others. But what he does tell about is how it is that experts show up and do a kind of safari through the neighborhood. And then they come away and they say, oh, this is what we're going to do.

And they go away and nothing happens. It's like they're on a safari. It's like when you're in the bus and you're going through the territory, you're looking at all the animals, you're looking at the situation, and then you leave. I wonder if anybody on a safari ever gets out and actually goes up close and looks at the specimen.

That's what Garvey's arguing for. Just go and talk to them. Talk to us. Listen to us. He's very articulate. It's a well-written book. And he is excruciatingly self-reflective and self-acknowledging his own weaknesses.

There's room for gospel transgression in that dynamic within the society here in Scotland. And in fact, it seems to me that there are Christians responding to this.

Perhaps you know the group of churches called 20 Schemes and how they're setting up churches across Scotland. And they've targeted 20 different schemes. And I've gone and read their webpage. They are totally orthodox.

[30 : 52] Their faith is solid. I would dare say they're even reformed. But their desire is to get into the middle of what they call the place where Scotland's perishing.

Millions of souls are perishing across Scotland's most deprived communities. The schemes are strong and vibrant Scottish communities with a rich history, but are often hit hard by complex social problems.

They also happen to be places least likely to have a gospel church or indigenous Christians. The local church is the answer, they say. They've committed gospel transgression.

And they've shown up in a difficult place. A place where there's an imbalance of power. An imbalance of privilege. An imbalance of place within society. Their statement of faith, as I said, their understanding, it's orthodox.

What they're responding to is the need of the neighbor. And that has caused them to transgress their own boundaries to go into a difficult place.

[31 : 56] So, the point of this short series, and there's one more tonight. We'll consider Jesus again. The point of this short series is just for us to examine how it is that we do this.

This is inevitable. This is not just pointing fingers at you or pointing fingers at you. It's inevitable. We do this. We create boundaries. We gerrymander. And yet we see that the church, the gospel is pressed across those boundaries.

In order to bring life, light into dark places, dead places. That's what the gospel does. And it pushes us. It pushes us. It pushes us out of our comfort zone.

It pushes us out of our calm and controlled place. This is for us to say, Ayano, it's to decentralize us with Three in the house, but three in above are great, whites Celsius, abide to us, and we've made the title of Christ ofomin that Jesus brought us to Christ.

back into his fellowship. One who possibly stole from him, who was his slave by definition, had absolutely no power. But that's what the gospel does.

[33 : 04] It brings us on the same level. We share communion. And that is the grace of God. Amen.