

The Fellowship of Faith

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[0 : 0 0] Our gracious Heavenly Father, we thank you again for your word, the Bible, as Judy prayed earlier. We thank you that you continue to speak to us through it. And what you have to say is still very much relevant for us today.

And so we pray, our Heavenly Father, that you might give us ears to hear, minds to understand, and hearts that would seek to live in light of it. We pray it in Jesus' name. Amen.

It would be great if you could turn in your Bibles to Philemon, if you haven't already, page 1202. And I mentioned last week that over these two weeks that Andrew is away between your series on Judges, I thought we'd look at two one-chapter wonders.

And so last week we looked at Jude, and this week we're looking at Philemon. And let me start by telling you that school holidays, as you know, just happened recently.

And there were a few tensions in our house over the school holidays between our two daughters. They share a room with each other, and so during the school holidays they're kind of in each other's faces a bit more.

[1 : 0 7] And there were such tensions, in fact, that when they went to the library, one of our daughters came home very excited with a book. She ran up to me and said, Dad, look at the book I found.

And the title of the book was, Ten Ways to Make Your Sister Disappear. I think I've got a slide on it. There it is. So it's a real book. Let's just say that we were very excited when school went back.

Now, of course, when they do fight, we have to remind them that they must forgive each other and be reconciled to each other. Not simply because it's the right thing to do, but because of who they are.

You see, they are sisters. They share the same DNA, the same surname. They participate in the same family. And this idea of sharing in or participating in the same family is really the idea of fellowship.

You see, their common DNA creates a fellowship, a bond between them. This common DNA means they have fellowship with each other as sisters. This is who they are.

[2 : 1 2] And so they actually have this fellowship with each other, whether they like it or not. It's intrinsic to who they are. But because they have this fellowship as sisters, then they are to express this fellowship by forgiving each other and being reconciled.

And if they don't, then they'd be going against who they are as sisters. It would be denying the bond or fellowship they have. Now, why all this talk about fellowship? Well, as Judy mentioned, this is the backbone of the letter to Philemon.

It is the foundation of Paul's appeal to Philemon. Our common faith in Jesus Christ creates a fellowship, not only between us and Jesus or God, as that verse from Corinthians expressed, but also between us and each other.

It creates a bond which we are to express in different ways, like loving and forgiving each other. This is what we see today in our one chapter wonder of Philemon. But before getting into the letter, let me give you some background.

Philemon lives in the city of Colossae, which I think is on the next slide. It's in modern day Turkey, the red dot there. And in verse two, we're told that the Colossian church, or at least part of it, met in Philemon's house, which means he was a pretty wealthy guy to have a house big enough for the church, or at least part of it, to meet in it.

[3 : 35] And we also know that he has a slave called Onesimus. Now, we need to remember that slavery in those days was not like the Negro slavery of America or Britain that Wilberforce fought against.

Slaves in ancient times included people from all races. And while some were forced into slavery, as we often think of it, others willingly chose to be slaves as a form of employment, if you like.

And freedom was not always a good thing in ancient times, since it could mean being worse off financially. And so some slaves wanted to remain slaves, as we saw in our first reading, and they'd get a special earring to kind of point it out.

And if you were freed, then it actually didn't change the way you were treated anyway. You didn't rise in rank in society, you were still known as a freed slave, but still a slave nonetheless.

What's more, slavery was a major part of society. In fact, one scholar estimates one third of people were slaves. One third. That's huge, isn't it?

[4 : 43] And so slavery in ancient times was very different to how we conceive of it. It was a mixed bag, and it seemed to have been a very normal part of life. But in verse 11, we're told Anisimus, whose name actually means useful, was a useless slave.

He didn't live up to his name, did he? And it seems Anisimus was so useless that he did something really bad, so bad that he ran away from Philemon, his master, perhaps robbing Philemon in the process.

But then Anisimus somehow found Paul, who was under house arrest. And so that meant Paul could still accept visitors. And in verse 10, we're told that Anisimus became Paul's son.

In other words, he became a son in the faith. He became a Christian. And in verse 12, Paul is now sending Anisimus back to Philemon, his master. But because Anisimus has now become a Christian while being away, because he has now got the same faith as Paul and Philemon, well, they have fellowship in the faith.

They have a bond with each other. They are brothers in Christ. And so Paul writes to ask Philemon to welcome Anisimus, not as a useless slave who ought to be punished, but now as a useful brother who ought to be forgiven.

[6 : 03] That's the big picture. But before we get to that, firstly, Paul prays for Philemon. So we're at point one in your outlines and verse four in your Bibles.

He says, I always thank my God as I remember you in my prayers, because I hear about your love for all his holy people and your faith in the Lord Jesus.

I pray that your fellowship, literally, with us in the faith may be effective in deepening your understanding of every good thing we share for the sake of Christ. Your love has given me great joy and encouragement because you, brother, have refreshed the hearts of the Lord's people.

Here, Paul thanks God for Philemon's love, doesn't he? Twice, in fact. For Philemon's love towards fellow Christians, as well as his faith in Jesus Christ.

And then in verse six, he prays for Philemon. And I think verse six is the key verse for the letter. I have a more literal translation on your outlines. It literally says, I pray that the fellowship of your faith might become effective.

[7 : 17] That's Paul's prayer, that he's the fellowship of Philemon's faith might become effective. And then he adds in understanding everything good among us for the sake of Christ. In other words, Paul prays that Philemon's fellowship might become effective, might do good for the sake of Christ.

And as we'll see, this good will be to welcome Onesimus, his once useless slave. Now, we need to note, by the way, that it's not as though Philemon's fellowship has been ineffective so far.

After all, in verse five, Paul thanks God for Philemon's love towards fellow Christians. And again, in verse seven, he rejoices at Philemon's love, which has done good, refresh the hearts of fellow Christians.

And so his fellowship in the faith has been effective thus far. He has been loving fellow Christians. He has been doing good towards them. But Paul now knows there is one other Christian who has hurt Philemon.

One other Christian whom Philemon just might find hard to love and do good towards. Of course, Philemon is not alone in this, is he?

[8 : 27] I mean, I'm sure we've all met other Christians who are hard to love, who have hurt us, perhaps, haven't we? I remember working hard on a sermon. I always work hard on sermons.

But work hard on sermons, and I'm preaching it clearly and engagingly. And then afterwards, someone coming up to me and giving me a book. And the title of the book was Preaching Better Sermons.

Let's just say I found it hard to love that person at that moment. And then I realised they gave all the staff the same book. I'm not sure what that means. But you see, we all get hurt by Christians, fellow Christians from time to time.

But effective fellowship means we have to love our fellow Christians and do good to them, even if they hurt us. Love, you see, is very important.

It's why Paul begins in verse 1 by calling Philemon not dear friend, but literally beloved. And in verses 5 to 7, Paul begins and ends the prayer with Philemon's love.

[9 : 32] You see, effective fellowship means loving fellow Christians, doing good towards them, even when it's hard. And we may not agree with them, and we may need to love them from a distance, but effective fellowship means loving them nonetheless.

And it's this love that is the basis of Paul's appeal. So point to verse 8. He says, Therefore, although in Christ I could be bold and order you to do what you ought to do, yet I prefer to appeal to you on the basis of love.

It is none other than Paul, an old man, and now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus, that I appeal to you for my son, Onesimus. You see, Paul is an apostle.

And so Paul has every right to order Philemon to do what he ought to do. But he doesn't want Philemon's forced obedience. He wants Philemon's willing obedience, which acts out of love for Onesimus.

Why? Well, because they are now brothers who ought to love each other. And it's very hard to command siblings to love each other. I know, I've tried.

[10 : 49] You will love your sister. No, it doesn't work. And so Paul doesn't command Philemon as an apostle. In fact, in verse 1, Paul doesn't even use the word apostle like he normally does.

Rather, he appeals to Philemon out of love. In fact, he identifies himself in verse 10 as an old man and a prisoner of Jesus Christ.

No doubt hoping to stir Philemon's heart to love. Not just love Paul, but Onesimus as well. And to help Philemon love Onesimus, Paul highlights Onesimus' new identity.

Do you see verse 10? The rest of verse 10. He appeals to Philemon for my son Onesimus who became my son while I was in chains.

Formerly he was useless to you but now he has lived up to his name and become useful both to you and to me. So I am sending him who is my very heart back to you.

[11 : 54] I would have liked to keep him with me so that he could take your place in helping me while I am in chains for the gospel. But I did not want to do anything without your consent so that any good you do would not seem forced but would be willing, voluntary.

And perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back forever no longer as a slave but more than a slave as a dear brother. He is very dear to me but even dearer to you both as a fellow man and as a brother in the Lord.

Notice here in verse 10 that Onesimus is called Paul's son twice. Not biological son of course but spiritual son in the sense that Onesimus became a Christian under Paul's ministry.

And in verses 15 to 16 Paul talks about God's reason for why Onesimus ran away. Humanly speaking he ran away out of fear. But verse 15 Paul says well perhaps the real reason perhaps God's reason was so that he might become a Christian.

And then he reminds Philemon of Onesimus' new identity not just as a slave but more than a slave verse 16 as a brother in the Lord.

[13 : 13] In fact twice he mentions that he's now a brother in the Lord. You see now that Onesimus has become a Christian there's been a change in his identity and his new identity is meant to supersede any other identity that he has.

His status as Paul's spiritual son and as a brother in the Lord Jesus his identity as a Christian is supposed to supersede his identity as a slave. We can see this with Paul as well.

I mean in verse 1 and 9 Paul calls himself a prisoner not of Rome but of Jesus Christ. You see humanly speaking his earthly identity is a prisoner of Rome but what matters most to Paul is his spiritual identity as one who belongs to Christ Jesus.

And this is what Paul wants Philemon to see in Onesimus. You see we all wear different hats different parts to our identity whether we are male or female a parent or not a spouse or not a university student a worker retiree or not but Paul wants Philemon to see that the identity that matters most that supersedes all others is our Christian identity our identity as God's precious children and brothers and sisters in Christ.

I remember some friends of ours coming down to Melbourne because the wife made it onto who wants to be a millionaire she didn't get the million dollars unfortunately but as Eddie Maguire was introducing her he was asking her some questions and he said and I understand that your husband is an Anglican minister no doubt Eddie had not met many of these before and so he turned to my friend the Anglican minister who was sitting in the front row of the audience and the cameras zoomed in on him and Eddie said is that right?

[15 : 14] and my friend said I'm a Christian and an Anglican minister now Eddie wasn't sure what to do with that reply because he just said right well first question he didn't quite get the point that my friend was trying to make but the point my friend was trying to make is the same point that Paul is trying to make here the identity that matters most is not our identity as a doctor a lawyer a teacher a slave or even an Anglican minister it's our identity as a Christian as a precious child of God as a brother or sister in Christ that's the identity that matters most that's the identity that determines our self worth as a precious child of God we are precious and that's the identity that shapes how we are to relate to each other as brothers and sisters and so having highlighted this for Philemon Paul finally tells him what he wants to do in verse 17 see verse 17 he says so if you consider me a partner welcome him as you would welcome me here we come to the actual appeal and the first command in the letter to welcome

Onesimus now Paul has taken a long time to get to this but he has taken a long time so that Philemon might obey not by force remember but out of love and notice this command is based on their fellowship in the faith the NIV obscures it a bit but on your outlines again I've got a more literal translation verse 17 literally says so if you have fellowship with me welcome him as you would welcome me you see since Paul and Philemon have fellowship in the faith and now that Onesimus has joined the faith well Philemon is to welcome Onesimus as a brother in the faith just as he would welcome Paul as a brother in the faith and if he does then he would that would be the answer to Paul's prayer back in verse 6 do you remember Paul prayed that the fellowship of his faith might be effective that he might know every good thing we have in Christ so that he would be willing to do good how well by forgiving Onesimus of whatever wrong he has done and welcoming him being reconciled to him as a true brother in the Lord now if you've ever been really hurt by another

Christian you will know that this is a hard thing to do because forgiving someone means taking the hurt upon yourself instead of taking the hurt out on them it means absorbing the hurt and that is hard but that's exactly what Jesus has done you see at the cross Jesus took the punishment or the payment for our sins upon himself instead of taking it out on us on judgment day and it cost him dearly it was hard yet he did it willingly and this is what Philemon is to remember this is what Paul prayed in verse 6 that his fellowship in the faith might be effective for the sake of Christ who died for him and Paul seems to subtly remind him of Christ by acting like Christ you see verse 18 he says if he has done you any wrong or owes you anything charge it to me I

Paul am writing this with my own hand I will pay it back not to mention that you owe me your very self I do wish brother that I may have 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 ask and it's verse 18 and 19 in particular I want to draw your attention to you see what Paul is doing he's saying if Onesimus robbed Philemon in the process of fleeing then Paul with his own hand promises to pay for Onesimus's sins his debt if you like you see Paul is being like Christ isn't he offering to pay for Onesimus's debt his sins and then he continues he reluctantly adds that Philemon actually owes Paul his very life because Paul shared the gospel with Philemon which saved him now Philemon owes Paul a debt of thanks for sure but it's ultimately Jesus to whom Philemon owes his life and so again

Paul is acting like Christ here to remind Philemon of the grace and forgiveness he has received in Christ so that Philemon in turn might show the same kind of grace and forgiveness to Onesimus when I was at school we read a book by Corrie Ten Boom I'm sure you've heard of her I think I've got a photo of her on the slide yet you might remember she's the Christian lady who hid Jews during the time of the Nazis and because of this she and her sister Betsy ended up in a concentration camp in Ravensbruck in her book Corrie speaks about going back to Germany two years after the war ended and speaking about God's forgiveness after one of her talks a man came up to her whom she remembered as one of the most cruel guards in that concentration camp he came up to Corrie and said that he had now become a Christian and then he said holding out his hand Fraulein will you forgive me big call isn't it at that moment

[20 : 55] Corrie admitted she could not for she remembered how her sister Betsy had suffered at this man's hands and eventually died in that camp and then she also remembered though on the other hand that God had forgiven her and then she also remembered that Jesus said if you do not forgive others their sins your father in heaven will not forgive you your sins and so in that moment still with this man's hand outstretched she prayed for help and she forced herself to lift her hand and as she did she remembered God answering that prayer and filling her whole being with warmth she describes it bringing tears to her eyes and then she suddenly let go shook his hand and said I forgive you brother she called in with all my heart it's incredible isn't it forgiveness is hard but God knows that first hand because it cost God his only son to forgive us and because he forgave us then we are to forgive others by offering to pay for Onesimus' debt and mentioning the debt that Philemon himself owes

Paul is acting like Christ here and in so doing he reminds Philemon of the forgiveness that Philemon has in Christ that he in turn might forgive Onesimus and welcome him as a dear brother with all his heart well what does all this have to teach us what about our fellowship of the faith point three well three quick things points of application first the first question the critical one really is are we part of this fellowship in the first place that is do we have faith in Jesus do we trust in him remember it's faith in Jesus that has created this bond of fellowship with each other and with him and so no faith no fellowship and no faith no forgiveness either so do you trust in Jesus are you part of this Christian fellowship that's the first question the second though is for us who do trust in Jesus for us who do believe and that is how do we see ourselves and each other for Paul our fellowship in the faith meant that our

Christian identity superseded all other identities that we may have Onesimus' identity as a brother superseded his identity as a slave that's what Paul meant when he wrote in Galatians I think it's on the next slide from Galatians he says there is neither Jew nor Greek slave nor free male nor female for you are all one in Christ Jesus now it doesn't mean we cease to be male or female or we cease to be a slave or whatever what he's saying is what matters most is our identity in Christ which makes us one makes us equals makes us equally loved by God and is this the identity that we measure our own self worth by or do we measure our self worth by how good a job we have or how comfortable a life we have or do we measure our worth by how loved by God we are and is this identity how we measure each other's worth as well it's kind of like those pictures you see you know how you've got two images in the one picture so I think

I've got a slide of it you may have seen this one before here's a picture but there's two images one is of an older lady so if you look at the middle circle that's her eye but it's also a picture of a young lady looking forward so if you look at the eye of the old lady it actually becomes the ear of the young lady and that's the best I can do is explanation if you can't see it I'm sorry but the point is in this one picture are two images and it's the same with people often in the one person there are several identities and so as you might get rid of that picture I think everyone's just looking at it and so as you look to the person next to you or in front of you or behind you you may see them in all sorts of ways as young or old though perhaps don't tell them which you think they are male or female and so on we all have different images just like that picture had different images we have different identities but the most important identity is that they are your brother or sister in Christ so is that how you see the person next to you or beside you in front of you behind you as a precious brother or sister in

Christ and thirdly since we are brothers and sisters in Christ then is our fellowship with each other effective do we matter to each other such that we care for one another welcome and forgive each other even if it's hard even if they've given you a book on preaching better sermons or more seriously even if they've contributed to your sister's death in a concentration camp our fellowship in the faith means we are to love each other welcome forgive each other even if they hurt us it doesn't mean we have to agree with everything they say truth does matter as we saw from Jude last week but we are to love them for our fellowship in the faith means we are to continue loving fellow Christians and so if you are nursing a grudge with someone because of some past hurt then can I say you must forgive for as Jesus said if you do not forgive others God will not forgive you and if it's people inside the church who have hurt you then we have an additional reason to forgive namely to make our fellowship in the faith effective but for the vast majority of people at Holy Trinity can I say I'm encouraged by the way people here do love and care for each other by the way you do show the fellowship of our faith effective our visitors have told me that they have felt welcome here which is terrific if you're visiting today

[27 : 04] I hope you feel welcome but welcoming in Philemon is more than just saying hello it's more than just welcoming the visitor it's loving the regular forgiving being reconciled but again I've been encouraged by the way I've seen you love each other I've seen it by the way you relate to each other ask after each other ring each other in fact I heard of one family at 1030 whose oven died they didn't have much money either so another family at 1030 bought them a new oven and got it installed for them fellowship in the faith being effective I've visited people in hospital who said that they've had lots of people visit from Holy Trinity and so they've felt loved if they're not visits they've had phone calls or people send them cards and so they've felt loved and it's terrific for it shows that your fellowship in the faith is effective Philemon teaches us this morning that we are to forgive one another and continue to love one another even if it's hard to do why because of who we are brothers and sisters in the Lord

Jesus Christ and so may our fellowship in him continue to be effective let's pray our gracious heavenly father we do thank you for the Lord Jesus who by his blood has brought us forgiveness and brought us into your family such that we are your precious children and we are brothers and sisters in him and so father we pray that you would help us to keep making our fellowship in Christ effective by the way we love forgive and care for one another we ask it in Jesus name Amen