

Christ Over Cultural Norms

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[0 : 00] Well, good evening. So, as you heard, we're looking at Philemon, and it's one of the great treasures of the New Testament. It is the third shortest book in the Bible, and we're looking at it because it's just a fabulous case study in what Paul has been talking about in Colossians.

But in order to understand Philemon well, we need to talk about two things before we get into the text. Firstly, we need to talk about slavery because Onesimus was a slave. It doesn't use that word in our translation. It uses the phrase bond servant, but he was a slave, so we need to talk about that. Second thing we need to talk about is that clearly there was some backstory to this letter. So, let's get our head around that backstory as well. But first, let's start with slavery. I want to put some context around that. So, when we hear the word slave, obviously we wince because it's we immediately think of the modern African slave trade, which was race-based, lifelong, based on kidnapping, and an absolute horror. But I think it's probably helpful to understand that this is not what slavery necessarily looks like back in the ancient Near East. Some slaves were prisoners of war, but others sold themselves into slavery as a way of paying off debt. So, you owed somebody tons of money. You could sell yourself to them for a period of time. The average period of time was around 10 years in order to pay off that debt. Now, there is evidence that some, you know, slavery could have been, was pretty brutal. There's also evidence that it wasn't like absolutely terrible either. I mean, you got paid. The kind of work you did was, it could be menial work, but slaves were also administrators, craftsmen, professors, the ancient, or the sort of the ancient equivalent of PhDs. There is evidence of slaves owning other slaves as well. Now, I'm not trying to romanticise it. I just want to put some context around that and then get across the idea that it was, it was very different to modern slavery.

Don't get me wrong, though. The idea of owning somebody, owning a person is, you know, is obviously abhorrent. And you might ask yourself, well, if that's the case, then why doesn't, even if it's not as bad as it is in modern days, why doesn't the Bible just say slavery is wrong on every page?

Well, it sort of does. It just, it just comes at it from a, just a different angle. Well, every, every major world culture until the modern period has had slavery. Every major world culture has had slavery, but it's only within Christianity did the idea eventually arise that slavery was this abominable thing. It was these 18th century British evangelicals, the abolitionists who laid out the implications of the gospel. For example, Paul in 1 Corinthians says that slaves and slave owners are equal before God or, or in Galatians 3, that slaves and free people are one in Christ. They, they laid out the implications of that. Now, what we have here in Philemon is a case study in how that plays out, how the implications of the gospel play out.

So, uh, now with this introduction, I'm not, I'm not suggesting to you that the goal of the book of Philemon was sort of an, it was nothing, it's not an anti-slavery tract as such. The goal was to lay out a gospel way of relating to each other that would transform all relationships, including the master-slave relationship. And of course, that's the idea that led the abolitionist movement that ended the trans Atlantic slave trade. Okay. So that's some cultural background. I hope that's helpful to you. Now we need to get to the story behind the letter. So let's talk about that briefly. So Philemon was a wealthy man. He owned slaves. He had a big house. He hosted a church in his house with his, what we think are probably his wife and his son. Those are the two names in verse one. He became a Christian through Paul. Paul indicates that in verse 19. Philemon had a slave called Onesimus. Onesimus is a name.

[4 : 37] It literally means useful. But despite the name, apparently not a great servant. The passage says he was actually a bit useless in verse 11. So anyway, for whatever reason, Onesimus does a runner. He runs away. And in verse 17, Paul hints that Onesimus actually stole from

Philemon on his way out the door.

Now running away was a grave crime back in the days. If you were captured, you could be flogged. You could be branded with a hot iron. They would brand the words, the letters F-U-G in your forehead, short for the Latin fugitavus, you know, fugitive. You could be crucified as well. It was a tremendously risky thing to do to run away if you were a slave. So Onesimus stole from his master, ran away, ended up in Rome, and somehow, we don't know, came into contact with Paul and was converted. He became a follower of Christ. So that's, I mean, that's wonderful. But he's still a runaway.

And he's hanging out with Paul. And Paul's really good mate is this guy called Philemon. It's an awkward situation. What do you do in that situation? Well, what Paul does is he writes a letter and he applies the gospel to that situation. He writes a difficult, but as you heard, a very tactful letter to Philemon, the slave owner. Okay. So that's the backstory behind this letter is a relationship between three people, all Christians, all trying to navigate a pretty tricky situation.

So what do we have so far? We have the cultural context of slavery. We have the background story. And before we get into the text again, I just want to say what the very big idea is. What is the big idea? I mean, what's the point of the book? How did this tiny, very personal letter make it into the canon of scripture? And others did not. Apparently, when we went through Corinthians a few years ago, I remember we talked about this. There's probably one or two other letters to Corinthians, which we don't have. Why Philemon and not them? What was so important about this mini book? It's like 300 words.

It's so important that God said, yep, that's going to make it in there. Well, as I said at the start, Philemon is a treasure. And the big point is this. This is why it made it in there. When relationships are rooted in Christ, it means we do things we don't naturally want to do, but we do them for the sake of the gospel. Let me put more simply. People who love Jesus live differently. We love differently. We love sacrificially. And Philemon, as I've said, is a brilliant case study in that. The gospel, and if you've tuned out, tune in right now. This is really important. The gospel asks each person in this book to love sacrificially. The gospel asks each person in this book to do something they don't want to do.

[8 : 03] Ask them to do something they don't want to do. Paul doesn't want Onesimus to go. You heard the passage read. He goes, I don't want you to go. They've become really close. It's really helpful having him there. Onesimus, the slave, doesn't want to go back to Philemon because he doesn't know what's going to happen when he gets back. It could be crucifixion. And Philemon probably doesn't want Onesimus to come back without punishing him somehow. And we'll talk about that soon.

So here's what I'm going to do now. I'm going to look at each of those scenarios quickly through the various sort of entangled relationships there. So let's start with Paul and Onesimus. Paul and the slave. In verse 10, Paul describes Onesimus as his son. Obviously, they have really connected. And there's a play on words regarding his name. So his real name, his name means useful. And then later he calls him, he says he's actually a bit useless. And now Paul says he's useful again. Why? Because Paul's arrested. Like he's chained to a Roman guard. Imagine having a guy with you all the time to help you. Wouldn't that be amazing? In verse 12, Paul says, sending Onesimus back to you would be like, it's like sending my heart back to you. But even though they're really close and Paul loves him, Paul says, I'm sending Onesimus back to you, Philemon, because your reconciliation, that too reconciliation there, that is more important than my comfort. In fact, Paul writes, you know, he's so committed to this idea of reconciliation. Paul says, if Onesimus stole from you, I'll pay that back.

So that's Paul doing something he doesn't want to do. But for the sake of the gospel, he's going to do it. Send Onesimus back. So that's Paul in the runaway. Now let's talk about Paul and Philemon. So Philemon was converted through Paul, but you see in the book, Paul doesn't want to kind of, and you know, Paul's a big name, right? The whole Christian scene back then. Paul doesn't want to force Philemon to take Onesimus back. You might've noticed it's quite unusual. Paul never refers to himself as an apostle in this book, which he normally does. Rather than using his kind of you know, his personal authority, Paul just appeals to the gospel. So in verse 21, he says, I know Philemon, you'll be obedient. He's not saying, Paul, you'll be obedient to me, Paul. He says, you'll be obedient to the implications of the gospel and how that transforms our relationship.

[10 : 53] And it changes the way we love. Paul says, welcome Onesimus back like a brother. This runaway slave who stole from you, welcome him back like a brother, because you both have the same Lord now.

Back in the days, that would have just been, that's just an outrageous thing to do. Let me remind you of verse one. To Philemon, our beloved fellow worker, and to Aphia, it's probably his wife, our sister, and Archippus, the fellow soldier, probably his son, and the church in your house. So this letter, you see that last bit there, the church in your house. Paul expects this letter to be written to the whole church, to be read to the whole church meeting in Philemon's house. Because of that expectation, Onesimus, the expectation is going to be, Onesimus is going to be part of that church community. It's going to be part of that faith community. He's not going to turn up, deliver the pizzas, and vanish. He's going to be part of the church. In that city, there's going to be this oasis of a radical way of living. It's Galatians 3.28 in action. Let me remind you of that passage. There is neither Jew nor Greek. There is neither slave nor free. There is no male, female. You're all one in Christ. There's going to be a revolution in that house.

That's what Paul is asking Philemon to do. It's outrageous. Think about what Philemon will face by treating Onesimus as a brother. You probably didn't think about this, but think about this, right? In his wider community, he is not going to be applauded or celebrated, the slave owner. Other wealthy families are not going to look at that and go, oh, what a great guy. Philemon is such a great guy. The guy he stole and ran away. We love Philemon.

He's a wonderful example. No. They're going to hate him. They're going to be angry with him for not making an example of a runaway slave. In fact, not just not making an example, but treating him like a brother. There were six million slaves in Rome. There was this constant fear amongst the wealthy of an uprising. So we treat slaves well, but we punish them harshly if they run away. By welcoming Onesimus back, that was a terrible precedent. The other slave owners would have been really angry. So what does Philemon do? There's the social obligation to the wealthy families, and then there's the call of the gospel. What's he going to do? We face this decision every day, don't we? Do we submit to culture? Do we submit to Christ? Lastly and quickly, let's think about Onesimus heading back to Philemon. Onesimus has to go back, Paul says. Got to go back. I'm sending you back. You're going to make things right. But imagine that trip home. Death was on the docket.

[14 : 03] Being physically branded a runaway. That's on the docket. Fear and shame, but also hope. Hope of a revolutionary way of relating. Paul says to Philemon in verse 15, you're going to go back forever. What does that mean? Paul is saying that the relationship between Onesimus and Philemon has been remoulded, reshaped, reinvented, completely turned upside down and changed. It's no longer slave and master, but a friendship that will extend into eternity.

Okay, I'm going to finish here. The gospel calls these diverse Christians, a prisoner, a member of the elite, and a runaway slave. The gospel calls these diverse Christians to love each other in an astonishing way, to do things they don't naturally want to do.

And the impetus is that they have all been at the receiving end of God's sacrificial love. It's a love that says, I choose reconciliation over comfort. I choose Christ over cultural norms.

I choose hope in hopeless situations. This is what Christ can do. This is what Christ can do in your heart.

Don't you want your life to be a case study in that? Amen.