

## **The Gospel Can't Stay Inside**

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**Philemon 1-25**

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Good morning. I'm not Jerry. My name is Matt Graf, and a couple of things that if you don't know who I am, you should know. One, I'm adopted son of the true God. He is my reason for living and what I do. I've been blessed to be married to my wife Amy for 20 and a half years. We have a total of six kids with one possibly added on through a foster care system. For the past four and a half years, I've had the joy of being the chaplain for Oak Hill Christian College, and training and diving into God's word and helping students take their next step in and on in Jesus Christ. And some other things to know, I love odd things of history, things that are off to the side that we don't normally pick up.

I thought I'd have a soft poll, how many of you have ever studied the book of Philemon before today?

Better than I thought it would be. So, I told my son I was gonna talk about this book and he said, "*Well, isn't that a fish?*" I'm not sure where he got that from. We're gonna dive in today, but before I begin, I need to pray:

*Father, I pray that the words of my mouth and the meditations of our heart are pleasing to You and to You alone. I ask all these things through our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, to God the Father, by the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

Now, as we've been on this journey close to two years, going through the book of Acts, finally finishing up, and we where you were left hanging because Acts doesn't give us the full story, it gives us what God wanted us to hear. So what was happening when Paul was there in prison in Rome? What were the things that were taking place? How was he preaching the Gospel? Well, a couple of letters came out of during this time, one of them was to the church in Colossae, a place that he had never been, but he had heard about and that actually had been started by one of his closest friends. And so he sends his letter out through the church of Colossae, but he also attaches this smaller letter, Philemon with it, because there's a certain situation that Paul feels compelled to write about.

Now, the two of these letters need to be taken and hand in hand, and the main themes of Colossians plays deeply into the book of Philemon. The two biggest things that we can glean from the book of Colossians are these: That no part of human existence is untouched by the loving and liberating reign of Jesus Christ. Everything is impacted by Jesus. And not only that, that the believers are invited to live in the present as if Jesus truly is king from the resurrection on forward, to live as His heaven is now. And so it was within this context that the church of Colossae receives the letter, and then also the side letter specifically addressed to Philemon. So on verses one, we'll go back through this letter, be able to fill in some missing parts, find out the characters and what is going on.

"Paul," we already have met, "*prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy*", he's mentioned in a couple of books back as one of the protégés that Paul has been discipling. They write to Philemon, "*Our dear friend and fellow worker, to Apphia our sister and Archippus our fellow soldier, and to the church that meets in your home.*"

Well, who's Philemon? From what we can glean from church history and understanding that sometime, we believe, when Paul was preaching in Ephesus, he came into contact with Philemon. Paul presented the Gospel, and Philemon surrendered his life to Jesus Christ.

After that, he goes back to his home in Colossae, and there, working with a fellow believer named Epaphras who is mentioned in a later part of this letter, started a church in Colossae, which meets in Philemon's home. He is someone of importance in the area, and has influence and a space to hold church in their home. We believe that Apphia is his wife. We're not really sure fully who Archippus is, could be a son, could just be

another member of the church there in Colossae. But to set the scope, this is dealing with a specific household, not only of the immediate family, but also the family of God: the church that is meeting in his home.

*"Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." After the typical introduction, knowing who we are talking about, Paul begins with a prayer of thanksgiving. "I always thank My God as I remember you in my prayers, because I hear about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints." Paul has heard about what Philemon has been doing and how he has been living for Jesus. "I pray that you may be active in sharing your faith so that you will have a full understanding of every good thing we have in Christ. Your love has given me great joy and encouragement because you, brother, have refreshed the hearts of the saints."*

It sounds like a glowing prayer, but it's also setting up for something. It's setting up this request that Paul is going to make here on behalf of someone else. And he's asking this thing that, "Hey, Philemon, my brother in Christ, I need your help. I need your help in the community." See, the way that the NIV translates the sharing of your faith comes from a Greek word meaning *koinonia*, and we've never heard that word before: fellowship, gathering together. It's one of the four things that the early church was called to be devoted to from Acts 2:42, to this *koinonia*, this fellowship of living out following Jesus Christ together. When you're active in *koinonia*, sharing your faith with others and with those outside, you come to this full understanding. So, this idea of community being together, this church body, partner with me in hearing what I have to say...

He begins in verse eight, *"Therefore, although in Christ I could be bold and order you to do what you ought to do, yet I appeal to you on the basis of love. I then as Paul, an old man and now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus, I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, who became my son while I was in chains."*

Alright, so who's Onesimus? Onesimus is Philemon's slave. He has worked in Philemon's house for a while, but something happened. We don't know exactly, but given most of our understanding of the history and the story is that Onesimus took money and ran. He ran all the way to Rome trying to leave that life. Now, his motives we don't know, but what we do know is that at some point, he comes into contact with Paul. Now, could it had been that he knew of Paul from his master talking about him? Perhaps. Or maybe just through God's providence allowed Onesimus to be at a place to hear Paul preach about Jesus Christ.

Paul knew himself, being an Apostle, saying that he has the right to tell Philemon what to do, but he doesn't. I'm going to be bold and trust in God that you will do what you ought, on the basis not of power, but of love: *"As someone who's experienced and chained for Jesus Christ, I ask you to think about Onesimus."*

Now, we run into some interesting hurdles when we start talking about slavery, because there is a stigma many times, because there is a lot of pain that has been caused through that institution since people have been created. One of the things we do need to set up though is understand the differences between slavery in the first century and slavery that we are typically accustomed to, understanding, and knowing about within our history. So if we look at slavery within the first century, there's four things that really need to understand there's a difference going on. First is that not all first century slaves were treated poorly and wanted to escape, in fact, some people would seek it out. They thought they were in such a station of life, and they would also see other people being taken care of, provided a place to live, food to eat, work to do, that they would sell themselves into the act of slavery in order to survive. And so, though there were cruel masters, there were also good ones. And realize that it's not just a simple understanding, but this is more complicated than we understand sometimes. Not only did some people seek it out, ancient slavery did not have racial overtones. The slavery that we're used to understanding within the history of this continent is directly based upon racism. The interesting thing is that if you were to walk down the streets of Rome or many streets within the Roman Empire, you couldn't automatically decide and be able to pick out, "Well, that person's a slave and that person is a free person," because they would come from all different walks of life, they would come from all different ethnicities. In fact, some of them would even rise in providence, those that were in maybe some of the richest parts of the Senate, those slaves would be taken care of better than most and have greater influence than those

in the outer areas.

So, knowing that you couldn't just point somebody out just because of the way they looked, it was very different than what we're used to understanding. Not only that, in ancient times education would enhance a slave's value, and so owners would encourage them to learn more. Learn a skill, learn a trade, learn to be able to read, write, dictate, debate, engage. Versus the illiteracy laws that were placed in more recent slavery, where that it was thought that if a slave was able to learn something more, then all of a sudden they would be dangerous and need to be put to the side.

The fourth thing is also that most slaves did not think of slavery as a permanent condition on the first century. Manumission was something that actually took place on a regular basis. Typically, it was a reward for faithful work over a time. It was part of the way of keeping that culture going, be able to help others out within the situation, within that society, because if people were regularly being freed for their good work, it was an incentive for those all around to help out at that time. Whereas slavery as what we have known from this history in this continent is it was a death sentence and it was generational.

Now, that doesn't mean that we get to excuse first century slavery as some idealistic undertaking. It wasn't. It was still somebody else owning someone who was created in the image of God. With that as our understanding, we continue on with what's going on within this letter:

*"I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, who become my son as I was in chains." Paul has seen the transformation of Onesimus turning from death to life because of Jesus Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit in his life. "Formerly he was useless to you. But now he has become useful both to you and me."*

I love a good pun. I love them a lot. In fact, one of my favorite ones, because it's almost Valentine's Day is, "What did the plow say to the tractor? Pull me a little closer, John Deere." One of the reasons I love Paul too is he slipped some of those in. So, Onesimus, his name means useful, but he plays on this a little bit in this verse, *"Formally he was useless to you."* And in the Greek that is *acrestos*. He used to be useless, but now he's useful because he's filling out his full name. The interesting thing is this is a double one here. See, *acrestos*, being useless, sounds identical to *achristos*, without Christ or Christ-less.

See, formerly Onesimus was *acrestos*. He was useless, he was Christ-less. But now, he's useful. And he is also one that belongs to the family of God. He is full of Christ. He now has his true identity, you. He was created in the image of God, and he has been redeemed by the shed blood of Jesus Christ, and he's being transformed by the power of the Holy Spirit. And so Paul says:

*"I'm sending him, who is my very heart back to you. 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 favor you do will be spontaneous and not forced."*

So, Paul does have a dilemma here. Onesimus is a runaway slave, and associating with such violates the Roman laws that if you came across or were to discover that there was a runaway slave, you were required by Roman law to make sure they got back to their master. Now, this flies in the face of what he's called to do, growing up Jewish, because in Deuteronomy 23: 15-16 God says how are you supposed to treat a runaway: *"If a slave has taken refuge with you, do not hand him over to his master, let him live among you wherever he likes and in whatever town he chooses. Do not oppress him."*

Paul was walking this thin line between the Roman law and what he knows from his upbringing; the thing that triumphs overall is the restoration that happens because someone comes to Jesus. And so in this delicate situation, he realizes that the relationship between Onesimus and God has been restored, but there is a dividing line in a relationship between two people right now that needs to be restored, and so he is sending Onesimus back to Philemon saying that this relationship needs to be restored. This reconciliation needs to happen. He

wants it to happen, but he's not so bold enough to be able to say, "You know what? I require you to do this.". Instead he says "No, I want you to follow the teaching of Jesus. I want you to follow the teachings of God. And are you able to forgive him, truly, Philemon, for what he has done to you?"

*"Perhaps the reason," in verse 15, "He was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back for good, no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother. He is very dear to me, but even dearer to you, both as a man and as a brother in the Lord."*

Paul brings up this idea of, what if this bad choice by Onesimus was part of God's providence? The fleeing, the wronging, yet God took that choice, and was able to guide Onesimus back or bring him into new life so that the reconciliation could take place. It would be useful to Paul and proclaiming the gospel. What happens when we make a poor choice, yet, God still intervenes, takes broken things and puts it back together, changes dead things to life, restores?

So, through this all, Paul has set up for his big ask, *"So if you consider me a partner,"* partner with you. The root of that is the same root as koinonia. *"So if you consider me part of the fellowship, part of the things that we are devoted to, welcome him as you would welcome me. If he has done you any wrong, or owes you anything, charge it to me."* Paul knows that he's done wrong. Paul is taking the place. Paul is trying to take the punishment that should fall on Onesimus. *"I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand. I will pay it back."* He has to mention this, because if this was read aloud to people, not everybody got to see the scroll, and see all of a sudden, "Here's the handwriting has changed and Paul's writing to himself." *"Not to mention that you owe me your very self."* A reminder that life came, I taught you who Jesus was. *"I do wish, brother, that I may have some benefit from you in the Lord. Refresh my heart in Christ. I'm confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I ask."*

See, Paul is relating to Philemon like Jesus did. In Luke 22:25-27:

*"Jesus said to them, 'The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them. And those who exercise authority over them call themselves benefactors, but you are not to be like that. Instead, the greatest among you should be like the youngest, and the one who rules like the one who serves. For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one who is at the table? But I am among you as one who serves.'"*

A different charge, rather than ordering, realizing and recalling back to what Jesus has taught: that we serve. We serve. And it's interesting that he concludes his ask with, *"Knowing that you will do even more than I ask."* What is Paul asking? What would be even more? One, that they are able to have a reconciliation, that forgiveness would take place, and that Philemon would bring him back into his household? That's a good start. But when he says, *"You will do even more than I ask,"* is that not a cry for freedom? "Would you set him free? Would you remove that dividing line and bring him in as a brother in Christ?"

The letter ends with some cultural norms, what some of you may see as something weird, and when he says, *"And one more thing, prepare a guest room for me, 'cause I hope to be restored to you in answer to your prayer."* That's odd for us, for people invite themselves over to your house. It's kind of weird, I think, in our culture, but this was a normal thing for what was going on. "Hey, I'm coming by, get the bed ready."

*"Epaphras,"* the guy that Philemon started the church of Colossae with, "says Hi." *"My fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends you greetings. And so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas and Luke, my fellow workers. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit."*

In this letter, this small letter, that is so rich with things that should challenge us, I ask you to consider today. When you know the story that goes on, there's risks that we have to take with an understanding what it means to walk with Jesus Christ, and so I'm going to ask you to risk one of four things this week, would you carefully consider something that maybe God lays on your heart to take a next step? I'm not asking to take another leap,

maybe it's just a small step closer to Jesus, but in one of these areas.

See, I see that there is a risk of community within this letter. Instead of what's been labeled as cultural church in our today's society, a volunteer association of people who happen to hold the same religious views, that wasn't what the first century church was like. It was more of like an extended family. It wasn't something private. I mean, this is a private letter that we have to Philemon from Paul, yet it seems that it was expected to be read in front of the church, to those meeting in your homes, in your home.

See, Paul had no desire to promote the idea that religious faith was something private, that which a person enjoys alone and practices as a separate individual. There's a community involved hand-in-hand with Colossians. When you put Philemon with Colossians, we learn that getting relationships straight is just as important as getting doctrine straight, because when the reconciliation happens between you and Christ, that changes the dynamic of what happens around you within relationships. Because if we are genuine disciples of Christ, we will relate to our fellow believers with grace, forgiveness and encouragement. So maybe for you it's to risk community, maybe it's taking a step to just be a little bit bolder in the association that you make, whether it be within things like life group or Sunday school. Maybe it's staying for the coffee hour, interacting with others, maybe it's taking a step with a co-worker. I don't know because I'm not God, but if God calls you to risk community, I say take the step.

The next thing that I see here is maybe it's the risk of freedom. And that freedom is what is typically described within our culture. Because today, many believe that freedom simply means that you can do what you want. "It's my choice. I can do this. You can't tell me no, it's my freedom." But when we're talking about freedom from the first century, Christians would understand that true freedom came from the transforming power of the Spirit, which enabled them to do what they ought, to choose the right thing, to be able to stand up for those, to give a voice to the voiceless, because true freedom, true freedom can only be known when one is in Christ. Maybe that's the risk that you need to take. Will you accept the freedom that Jesus offers to be transformed, to be known by Him and know Him? To follow Christ?

Risk community, risk freedom, or the risk of forgiveness. Forgiveness was not the norm in the Roman world. Payback was, retribution was. But it's a fundamental requirement for Christians. I have a couple of verses to read with you upfront here, if you can follow along. *"For if you forgive other people when they sin against you, your Heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins."* It's alright, I just have them on the slides today. *"Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, Lord, how many times should I forgive my brother or sister that sins against me? Up to seven times? Jesus answered, I tell you not seven times, but 70 times seven times."* And in the Colossians: *"Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly love, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with one another and forgive one another. If any of you has a grievance against someone, forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity."*

See, CS Lewis put it this way: *"We all agree that forgiveness is a beautiful idea until we have to practice it."*

Something that Jesus talked about and Paul wrote about. The problem is that forgiveness in our age has become too sentimental and trivialized. True forgiveness does not excuse sin. It also does not forget that anything ever happened. Sometimes it takes a while, and it's a challenge. But when we follow Jesus, there is this hope that we hold out. So maybe you need to risk forgiveness. Maybe it's seeking forgiveness for someone you've wronged. Maybe it's accepting the forgiveness. What will we risk?

And the last one I see is that there's a risk of social impact. Now, there's been charges leveled at Christians because the lack of outright outrage of slavery within the New Testament, and how some people generations ago tried to use Scripture to justify treating another person created in the image of God as less than human. But when we dive into the world and we read these words, see, Philemon yields to Paul's request and does more than he asked. It shows that the truth of the gospel breaks down social barriers and dethrones cultural

indoctrination.

So the dividing lines were always being challenged. Paul does this over and over again, verse in first Corinthians Chapter 7:

*"Nevertheless each person should live as a believer in whatever situation the Lord has assigned to them just as God has called them. This is the rule I lay down in all the churches. Was a man already circumcised when he was called? Should not become uncircumcised. Was a man uncircumcised when he was called? He should not be circumcised. Circumcision is nothing. And uncircumcision is nothing. Keeping God's commands is what counts. Each person should remain in the situation they were in when God called them. Were you a slave when you were called? Don't let it trouble you. Although if you can gain your freedom, do so."*

Paul wrote to the Galatian church:

*"For the one who was a slave when called to the faith in the Lord is the Lord's freed person. Similarly, the one who was free when called is Christ's slave. You're bought at a price and do not become slaves of human beings. Brothers and sisters, each person as responsible to God should remain in the situation that they were in when God called them."*

And then when he wrote to the church in Colossa: *"For we were all baptized in one spirit, so as to form one body, whether Jew or Gentile, slave or free, and we were all given the one Spirit to drink."*

See, when we really put it this way, we see that when a master is expected to treat a slave as a brother in Christ, as a representative of the Apostle Paul, as an equal partner and as a moral responsible human being who has a right and not just duties, the institution of slavery is being subverted. Though it was not direct, Paul is getting at the heart of things where transformation truly change; within each household. And has caused people throughout the ages who have been known as followers of Jesus Christ to reach out, whether it be impacting people through setting them free, emancipation, defeating them, to offer medical care. You know, it used to be hospitals were all named after people on Scripture? There was a reason for that. These early Christians, when there was a plague, it would stay and they would go in and offer the best care they could, when the doctors of the day would run away. And it impacted many lives.

So what would you risk this year or this week? Will you risk community? Will you risk freedom? Will you risk forgiveness? Or will you risk social impact? 'Cause God knows and we don't, what comes next. I mean, why do we have this little letter of Philemon? Why was it kept? I'm gonna trust God wanted us to know it. There's an interesting after story that's possible. It's not as sure as the Scripture that we read, but it's just a possibility. Around 110 AD, Ignatius, Early Church Father, wrote of one Onesimus who was the bishop in Ephesus. Maybe this letter was kept because Philemon did do more than Paul asked and it was kept as a testament for the transforming work of Jesus Christ. Let's pray.

*Father, I thank you for Your word, I thank You for the challenge that it gives us to live truly free in Christ, to seek reconciliation, to know that we have been forgiven and to forgive others. And because of the life that we have with You, You challenge us to go forth and be used by You to make an impact. Father, may You receive all the glory and credit in Jesus's name. Amen.*