

Philemon 8-25 “A Beloved Brother: The Heart of Paul’s Appeal”
Jeremiah 34
Psalm 103:13-18

November 6, 2022

The OT law was clear:

Israel was not supposed to enslave fellow Israelites.

In certain cases (particularly for debt), an Israelite might temporarily become a slave –
but they were to be set free in the 7th year.

Jeremiah 34 makes it clear that Israel was ignoring this requirement.

Oh, sure, they “set them free” –

but only to enslave them once more.

But God says that you should not enslave your brother.

In Philemon, Paul will make a big deal about how Onesimus is *your brother*.

You should not be holding your brother as a slave.

Many have criticized Paul for failing to condemn the institution of slavery.

They want Paul to be a modern abolitionist.

But abolition takes as its goal merely the “end of slavery.”

Abolitionism has no positive goal – *what are you going to replace it with?*

Paul wants to see *reconciliation* between Philemon and Onesimus.

He wants to see them *live together as brothers*.

In the 1860s, the abolitionists won.

Slavery was ended in the United States.

But under the Jim Crow laws,

the freedmen were largely handed back to their former masters.

There was no reconciliation between black and white.

This is especially obvious when we consider the church.

Why are there black denominations today?

Largely because whites didn’t want blacks in their churches.

Oh, they didn’t mind if the blacks came and sat in the balcony!

But to have a black elder? A black deacon?

Never!

To have a black man walk in your front door and sit down in your parlor?

When R. J. Breckinridge was in Philadelphia for General Assembly one year,

he paid a visit to a prominent black businessman.
In those days, it was common for social calls to be reciprocated!
But the family that RJ was staying with was horrified at the thought
that this prominent black businessman might pay them a visit!

I want you to think about that for a moment.
If you were that black businessman!
Yes, you are glad that the great R. J. Breckinridge has visited you.
It helps to have friends in “high places”!

But as RJ leaves that evening, you know that you are not *really* considered equals.
Sure, the rules of hospitality say that you should call on him.
But the unwritten rules of racism say that it’s not worth the trouble...

Brothers and sisters,
that is *not* the sort of “freedom” that Paul has in mind!
Paul wants Philemon to see Onesimus as *his brother*.
Paul wants RJ’s host to see this black Christian businessman as *his brother* –
to be welcomed at the door!
Not treated like a second-class citizen in the family of God!

Emancipation without reconciliation has led to 150 years of continued estrangement.
Are we brothers?

If we are brothers,
then we need to *act* as though we are part of the same family!

We sing about this new family in Psalm 103.

Sing PHSS 162 (Psalm 103:13-18)

Read Philemon

“Paul’s letter to Philemon serves as a model of Christian compassion.
In many ways, it parallels Jesus’ parable of the prodigal son,
which captures the gospel in a nutshell.
The letter speaks of failure,
the need for intercession, returning, forgiveness, and restoration.
When we read it side by side with the letter to the Colossians,
we learn that getting relationships straight
is just as important as getting doctrine straight.
If we are genuine disciples of Christ, we will relate to our fellow believers
with grace, forgiveness, and encouragement.” (Garland)

As we saw last week,

Paul's goal in this letter is *reconciliation*.
Often we think that Paul's goal is for Philemon to *emancipate* Onesimus.
But Paul's goal is not emancipation.
He's not trying to turn Christianity into a social justice movement.

Rather, Paul wants something that is far more permanent.
Emancipation simply frees slaves –
but often leaves them in a socially precarious situation.
Reconciliation brings about an entirely different state of affairs.

What do I mean by “reconciliation”?

Well, that's at the heart of Paul's letter to Philemon:
“that you might have him back forever,
no longer as a slave but more than a slave,
as a beloved brother...”

Reconciliation means that the walls – the barriers – that were between us
are broken down.

In the case of racial reconciliation,
reconciliation means that when you see a black man on the street
(or in a convenience store),
your first thought is not *fear* – but *love*.

1. The Structure of the Epistle

- A. Greeting (v1-3)
- B. Paul's Prayer: Faith and Love Becoming Effective (v4-6)
- C. You Have Refreshed the Saints (v7)
- D. Begetting Onesimus (v8-11)
- E. Sending Onesimus (v12)
- F. A Beloved Brother (v13-16)
- E'. Receiving Onesimus (v17)
- D'. Begetting Philemon (v18-19)
- C'. Refresh My Heart (v20)
- B'. Obedience and the Efficacy of Your Prayers (v21-22)
- A'. Final Greeting (v23-25)

I want you to think about how the structure of the book helps communicate its message.
I've given you an outline that shows the chiasmic structure of the book.

The term “chiasm” refers to the Greek letter “chi” (which looks like an X).
A chiasm is a literary structure which is *very* common in the ancient world.
I don't know whether ancient authors actually *thought* about it –
but they very often use this A-B-C-B-A structure.

In Philemon, it looks like this:

The A sections open and close with Paul's greeting.

The B sections use the language of prayer (v 4-6 and v21-22).

The C sections use the language of refreshing (v7 and v20).

The D sections speak of how Paul is related to Onesimus (v8-11) and Philemon (v18-19).

The E sections speak of how Paul is sending Onesimus (v12)

and how Philemon should receive him (v17).

And the central section is the heart of Paul's appeal –

how Onesimus is now a beloved brother.

But let's look a little more closely at this –

because if you watch how this works, you can see what Paul is doing!

We looked last time at Paul's greeting and Paul's prayer.

Now we turn to how Philemon has refreshed the hearts of the saints (v7)

which is paralleled in verse 20,

with Paul's request that Philemon now refresh *my heart* in Christ.

Verses 8-12 then turn to Paul's setup for the central plea.

⁸ *Accordingly, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do what is required,* ⁹ *yet for love's sake I prefer to appeal to you—I, Paul, an old man and now a prisoner also for Christ Jesus—* ¹⁰ *I appeal to you for my child, Onesimus,* ^[b] *whose father I became in my imprisonment.* ¹¹ *(Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful to you and to me.)* ¹² *I am sending him back to you, sending my very heart.*

Paul says that he could *command* Philemon –

but he prefers to make his appeal.

Paul recognizes that all of this could go horribly wrong!

If Philemon refuses to see what the gospel requires –

if Philemon prefers to operate by the old patterns of Greco-Roman culture –

rather than the new pattern of the new family of Jesus –

then the message of the gospel will be damaged in the Colossian church.

So instead he appeals to Philemon for “my child, Onesimus,

whose father I became in my imprisonment.”

This is really strong language.

I am sending you my heart – my inner being.

(Remember, we saw in Colossians that Paul thinks of the heart as the inner man – the core of *who we are* in Christ.

And because Onesimus and I are *both* in Christ –

therefore when I send him, I am sending my very heart.)

How you treat him is how you receive me.

(indeed, the parallel section in verse 17 says exactly that!)

If you want a literal translation of verse 12,

Paul says I appeal to you for my child, Onesimus,

“whom I am sending to you, him, that is, the one who is my inner self.”

This is preparing Philemon for the point in verse 17 –

“receive him as you would receive me.”

Onesimus is now an extension of Paul.

The gospel of Jesus transforms family relationships.

This old bachelor, Paul, has thousands of children!

¹³ I would have been glad to keep him with me, in order that he might serve me on your behalf during my imprisonment for the gospel, ¹⁴ but I preferred to do nothing without your consent in order that your goodness might not be by compulsion but of your own accord.

John Chrysostom, who understood the rhetorical dimension to Paul’s style, comments well on these verses:

“Be careful to observe how much groundwork is necessary

before Paul honorably brought Onesimus before his master.

Observe how wisely he has done this.

See for how much he makes Philemon answerable and how much he honors Onesimus.

You have found, he says, a way by which you may

through Onesimus repay your service to me.” (in Witherington, 78)

“Not by compulsion”

Paul recognizes that he has no ability to force Philemon to “do the right thing.”

Sure, Paul is an apostle,

but what does that *really* mean?

If Philemon refuses to emancipate Onesimus –

and *worse* if Philemon refuses to *reconcile* with Onesimus –

what can Paul *do*?

Sure, *we* think of Paul as the great apostle!

But from 1-2 Corinthians, it’s pretty clear that in Paul’s own day,

he was quite used to people ignoring his counsel!

So Paul realizes that how Philemon handles this will affect not only Onesimus, but the whole church – the whole community of faith.

And so he works very carefully to persuade Philemon to do what is right.

Paul has done for Philemon what he hopes that Philemon will do for Onesimus.

Paul has modeled the sort of humility and love *for* Philemon

that he wants to see *in* Philemon.

And in so doing, Paul fulfills the Great Commission:

“Teach them to observe all that I have commanded.”

Teach them – not merely in word, but also in deed.

Here the apostle *models* that teaching – by doing it himself.

What would happen if your pastor – your elder – came to you with this sort of request.

You’ve got a difficult relationship issue at work

and I wrote to you, urging you to do things a certain way.

I know.

You would like to think that your business and interpersonal decisions are *yours*.

“No one’s gonna tell *me* what to do with my life!!”

But we *need* each other to advise us – and challenge us – in our ethical decision-making.

I need it.

After all, Philemon is probably a pastor or elder.

We all need wise counsel from others who are seeking first Christ’s kingdom.

And when we hear that counsel, we need to be slow to turn it away.

After all, others are more likely to see our blind spots than we are!

¹⁵ *For this perhaps is why he was parted from you for a while, that you might have him back forever,* ¹⁶ *no longer as a bondservant^[c] but more than a bondservant, as a beloved brother—especially to me, but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord.*

Notice how Paul argues.

“perhaps this is why he was parted from you for a while...”

Paul does *not* say – “this is why he ran away.”

Rather, perhaps this is what *God* was doing

(in spite of – *and through* – what Onesimus did).

Paul wants Philemon to see God’s purpose behind Onesimus’s actions.

God has used this episode in their lives to transform their relationship.

Philemon needs to recognize what God has done.

God has transformed Onesimus from a slave into a beloved brother.

And Paul wants to make clear that he is not just speaking of a “spiritual” brotherhood –

“both in the flesh and in the Lord.”

If Paul had just said “in the Lord” – it might have been possible to interpret him as saying

“he may still be a slave in the flesh, but he is a brother in the Lord...”

but Paul sees this brotherhood as having both spiritual and temporal aspects:

our physical and social relations are transformed by the gospel.

It's worth pointing out that Paul does not completely obliterate Roman social relations.
When he says that Philemon should receive him back –
 he is assuming the Roman institution of patronage.
Philemon is a wealthy man.
 He is a patron who has an extensive network of clients –
 those who look to him as their patron and benefactor.
Paul wants Philemon to include Onesimus as one who is under his patronage.
But Paul wants *more than that*.

The ordinary pattern would be that a master would free his slave,
 and the ex-slave would become a “freedman”
 who would owe his “patron” service.
But Paul does not say that Philemon should welcome Onesimus as a client –
 or as a freedman –
 but as a beloved brother.

Welcome him home the way that the father welcomed the prodigal son!
Or, better, welcome him home the way that the older brother
 should have received his younger brother.

After all, Paul himself takes the place of the father who welcomes the prodigal,
 and now he writes to Philemon, the older brother,
 and urges him to rejoice with me, because your brother, who was lost, is found!

In other words, Paul starts from the given realities of the Greco-Roman social relations –
 but then transforms them with the message of the gospel!

That's why, in verse 17, Paul urges Philemon to receive Onesimus as he would receive Paul.

¹⁷ So if you consider me your partner, receive him as you would receive me. ¹⁸ If he has wronged you at all, or owes you anything, charge that to my account. ¹⁹ I, Paul, write this with my own hand: I will repay it—to say nothing of your owing me even your own self. ²⁰ Yes, brother, I want some benefit from you in the Lord. Refresh my heart in Christ.

Paul offers to pay any debt for Onesimus
 (though it seems pretty clear that Paul knows that Philemon will not hold him to this!).
 You owe me even your own self!

You can see here Paul's imitation of Christ:
 As Jesus came as our substitute,
 Paul now sends Onesimus as his substitute (v17)
 And as Jesus paid the price for our sin,
 Paul now offers to pay any debt for Onesimus (v18)

Of course, Paul is *doing this* as an *example* to Philemon –
expecting Philemon to “imitate me as I imitate Christ.”

Indeed, in verse 21, Paul adds:

²¹ *Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say.*

What is the “even more” that Paul refers to?

Well, for one, *not* charging Paul for Onesimus’s debt would be one thing!

But probably Paul is hinting at the possibility of sending Onesimus back to help Paul.

²² *At the same time, prepare a guest room for me, for I am hoping that through your prayers I will be graciously given to you.*

Notice how Paul is convinced that Philemon’s prayers will be effective.

“I am hoping that through your prayers I will be graciously given to you.”

Prayer works.

This is like what Paul writes to the Philippians,

“for I know that through your prayers

and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ

this will turn out for my salvation.” (Phil 1:19)

After all, when you pray, you are talking to the One who governs all things!

When we don’t pray – we are saying that we can take care of it ourselves!

²³ *Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends greetings to you, ²⁴ and so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke, my fellow workers.*

²⁵ *The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.*

“Paul’s closing greetings and benediction

parallel and reaffirm the truths declared in his opening greetings and salutation...

The divine communication to these people (Paul included)

is that the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ is theirs.

This is reminiscent of the Aaronic blessing found in Num. 6:22-27.

At the conclusion of that benediction,

God places his name upon the people so that the people carry his identity...”

(Olinger)

So what happened?!!

In one sense, we don’t know exactly the outcome of the letter,

but the fact that the letter was preserved *probably* indicates that it was successful.

(Philemon, certainly, did not destroy the letter!)

And at the beginning of the second century,

Ignatius of Antioch makes reference to a Bishop Onesimus in Ephesus –
so it would appear likely that Paul’s wish was granted...

Certainly by the early 2nd century Christians were paying to manumit their fellow believers.

I’d like to close with some reflections on what Paul is doing with gospel reconciliation
here in Philemon.

2. “No Longer as a Slave but...as a Beloved Brother”: Gospel Reconciliation

Sometimes you hear people say that the way to solve social problems is by preaching the gospel.
There is a sense in which that is true – but you have to be careful!
What do you mean by “the gospel”?

For instance, in the Rwandan genocide, 25 years ago,
90% of the Rwandan population were professed Christians.
They believed the “gospel” – but they still slaughtered each other!

Here’s the problem –
the missionaries had preached a gospel that focused only on being rightly related to *God*.
If you say that the gospel just means being rightly related to God –
then how you treat one another becomes less important.

But Paul makes it clear that the gospel results *both* in a new relationship with God,
and a new relationship with each other.
If Jesus has established a new family –
and if Jesus has made you a *part* of this new family –
then *how you think about family* has to change!

In our day, we are often preoccupied with the nuclear family.
Just look at how our neighborhoods are designed!
Every (nuclear) family has its own space!

When I visited Tibet with Rex, I saw a very different model.
Houses are designed to have two or three (or even four) distinct living spaces –
so that extended families can live together over generations.
(Each living space has a fireplace/cookstove in the middle –
with seats around the outside of the room that double as sofas and beds.
Especially in the winter, *everyone* sleeps around the central fireplace!)

Of course, part of the problem in Tibetan Buddhism is the idolatry of the ancestors –
so I’m not recommending Tibetan architecture as a solution!

But when I was in Eritrea, they also had housing that was designed for extended communities

(similar to the old Italian villa).

But it reminds us that the gospel decenters every culture.

Jesus says, “do not be anxious, saying, ‘what shall we eat?’
or ‘what shall we drink?’
or ‘what shall we wear?’

For the Gentiles seek after all these things,
and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all.

But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness,
and all these things will be added to you.” (Matthew 6:31-33)

The kingdom of God and his righteousness has to do
with how we are related to *God* – AND how we are related to one another.

As one writer puts it,

“The spiritual well-being of the congregation will always be demonstrated publicly
by the well-being of its social relationships.” (Wall in Garland)

Paul recognizes that what he is asking will challenge the core of Philemon’s old world.

As another commentator says:

“for Philemon the issue entails a decision between two symbolic universes, two social worlds,
and most of all two identities.

In Paul’s mind Philemon has only one option,

but in Philemon’s mind there are two because prior to Onesimus’ running away
he lived in two worlds.

Previously, he could be ‘in Christ’

while still being and acting like the master of a slave ‘in the world.’

Now he finds that ‘being in Christ’ makes a totalistic claim upon him
from which there are no exceptions.

If he is to remain in the service of Christ the Lord,

he cannot be ‘in Christ’ only when he is ‘in church.’...

Through his letter to Philemon, Paul therefore engineers a crisis for his fellow worker
in which he has to make a decision about which of the two worlds are to be his.”

(Peterson in Witherington, 89).

The gospel will often challenge you in these ways!

I want to challenge us to think a little differently about race
than you used to.

Because when we are baptized into one body –
when we are baptized into Christ –
we become one new family in Jesus.