

# Paul's Prison Epistles

## Lesson 4

## Paul and Philemon

Faculty Forum



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# **Paul's Prison Epistles**

## **Lesson Four: Paul and Philemon**

### **Forum**

With  
Dr. Reggie Kidd

Students  
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Wes Sumrall

#### **Question 1:**

#### **Does Paul's letter to Philemon have any doctrinal authority over modern Christians?**

**Student:** Reggie, how did the letter of Philemon make it into the New Testament? It is a letter that is written to an individual and there's not a lot of doctrine in it. So, I am wondering what authority does it have over us today and in the lives of others?

**Dr. Kidd:** Well, I'm sure it got in because it was written by Paul. And the fact that it was written to an individual is secondary to the fact that Paul wrote it. But it isn't just individual because, as we saw in the lesson, he is writing it to Philemon in the context of his house church. And even though the doctrine doesn't sit like really heavy on it, there is pretty significant doctrine underneath it. And I think, in the wisdom of the church, there was a recognition that the apostle to the Gentiles commissioned to take the gospel to them was here applying the gospel in a very specific situation that should be suggestive of the application of the gospel to lots of other kinds of situations.

#### **Question 2:**

#### **Would Paul's letter to Philemon have been read to the entire church?**

**Student:** Reggie, would the letter to Philemon, the person, would it have been read in the gathered church? And if it would, wouldn't that have been a little awkward to have a letter written to you was being read in front of all of your friends and fellow Christians?

**Dr. Kidd:** That's a good point, Christopher. It does look like this letter would have been read in front of the church. In fact, it's not written just to Philemon by himself because Paul sends greetings to more than Philemon. He sends greetings to Apphia, and to Archippus, and the church that meets in their house. So, it's clear that for Paul this is a very personal matter but it's not a private matter. The relationship between Philemon and Onesimus is about, well, it's about Philemon's family because

Onesimus was a part of his family and it's going to affect the whole church. So sure, it would affect the way Philemon hears the letter and he might have felt a little sting of awkwardness. And yet, I think we have a misconception of Christianity if we think that it is fundamentally a private matter and not a matter of relationships from beginning to end. So, I think there is some pastoral wisdom here in Paul reminding Philemon, even in the pastoral setting that he is to deal with this issue that much more is at stake than the question of what Onesimus might owe him. There are lots of people that are looking. There are lots of folks whose appreciation of how the gospel gets applied is at stake in how he works this out and how he responds.

### **Question 3:**

**How often did Paul describe the gospel's implication for a specific person?**

**Student:** Reggie, you mentioned that Philemon's situation with Onesimus is a chance for Paul to apply the implications of the gospel. Is this the only one time Paul uses an individual or an individual circumstance to do that or is that something he does in other places as well?

**Dr. Kidd:** He begins with himself as he tells the Corinthians, "Imitate me as I imitate Christ." And there was a certain sense that he had of his own vulnerability and accountability to the people that he was serving to say, "Look at my life and see if you see Jesus in me." He going to write to Timothy in 1 Timothy about how his own being chief of sinners is case and point of the fact that Christ came in mercy for sinners and not for righteous people. And he feels like the gospel should be embodied in our lives from being to end. So, he is not at all afraid to point to his own protégés like Timothy and Epaphras and points to them like in the letter of Philippians that we deal with in the next lesson as examples of the kind of life he wants to promote. So, Philemon needs to understand and I think rightly in Paul's eyes that he like Paul has been benefited tremendously from the gospel and is himself in a position either to benefit people who are dependent upon him or not to do right by them and not to benefit them. And thus in his own being, be a denial of the gospel. And I think, in one respect, all he is doing with Philemon is putting before him the responsibility to think about how his behavior and how he works out his matrix of relationships, either reflects the gospel or denies the gospel.

### **Question 4:**

**Do all forms of slavery compromise human dignity?**

**Student:** Reggie, it seems like any time Christians read the book of Philemon, the subject that's always in the back of our minds is slavery

**in general. Doesn't slavery in any form, compromise human dignity?  
And what it is that early Christians knew that maybe we are missing?**

**Dr. Kidd:** Well, Christopher, you are right. Slavery would not exist were it not for the fall. And the New Testament's task of acceptance of its existence is an expression of the understanding that we still live in the "not yet" and when the Lord finally returns, every valley will be raised and every mountain brought low. In the meantime, we have to kind of grope our way through a world that is still falling. And people are going to have to live through hardship. It is important to understand that the institution of slavery as Paul would have experienced it and as the early church would have experienced it in the main was way different from slavery in the antebellum South in the United States, or the slave trafficking and forced prostitution that is going on now around the world. It was a far more benign institution.

But the point is, Paul wasn't really thinking primarily in terms of an institution. He was thinking in terms of relationships between brothers and sisters who get transformed by the power of the gospel. And his firm commitment was that where you are in whatever social matrix you are in does not define who you are. And it is possible. And here is the redemptive thrust for all of us because all of us are going to experience some measure of what it is to be a slave, some measure of what it is to be without your ability to choose being there on the underside of an over-under relationship. And all of us have the challenge of figuring out how it is that we tell ourselves the story of our having been bought with a price and our not being defined by being in that position. And all of us are going to be, or almost all of us, are going to be on the topside of over-under relationships. And the way the gospel works itself out in Paul is he recognizes that people are going to be in over-under relationships and with those places in life come responsibilities. And especially for Paul, who was free, who had all kinds of privileges and advantages, like with Philemon the preeminent responsibility was to figure out how to be a steward of the advantages that you have to serve and benefit other people.

So, that is a starting point in understanding how to approach slavery. At the same time, it's important to recognize that while there is a tacit acceptance of the way things are in Paul's world there is not an endorsement of slavery as such. In fact, in 1 Timothy 1 where Paul runs through the basic outline of the ten commandments and talks about how the law was given so that we would understand what unrighteousness is, one of the terms that he uses in the place of stealing is "man stealing." And "man stealing" was a term used for slave trading in Paul's world where people would go and steal people and force them into slavery. So, I think the way Paul would express himself would be to the extent that slavery can serve as a means of establishing a relationship within a household situation for a person who would be without social protection, without work, without the dignity of having a place at somebody's table.

And again, we have to appreciate that in Paul's day municipal domestic slavery was about being brought into somebody's house and the householder would be assuming responsibility for their care, and their provision, for giving them work, for taking care of them. And to the extent that this particular social arrangement can be used to enhance

people's dignity as opposed to just throw them into the street without any resources, Paul is willing to accept it. But to the extent that it's exploitative, to the extent that people are going out and grabbing people, and forcing them into this kind of work, I think Paul would say, "No, the church needs to stand up and say this would be wrong."

### **Question 5:**

#### **How should the church respond to modern forms of slavery?**

**Student:** Reggie, slavery is clearly different today and was different in the South than it was in Paul's day, and in many countries of the world today, it is just rampant. And you made an allusion to forced prostitution and sex slaveries that are rampant. What exactly is the response of the church today to that? How far does the church go? Do we support organizations such as International Justice Mission that go into countries like this? And it's a messy situation certainly. We can't say to those victims to just stay within their social framework, like Paul would say back then. But what do we say?

**Dr. Kidd:** That's a great point, Wes. Yes, I think we support those kinds of movements. And Paul can't say everything that he might say any time he tries to say anything or he wouldn't say anything at all. And there are other places in Paul where he clearly recognizes even so called secular standards of what is right and what is fair. And he tells us to do good to everybody, to the household of faith in particular, but to have an eye to that which is good for everybody. And to do that which is understood to be right, and true, and correct by everybody else. And in the case of the just and fair treatment of people who are unable to do good for themselves and who are forced into harsh dehumanizing situations, there are a host of Old Testament passages and considerations that I think Paul would go to as quickly as we would about the need to defend the orphan and the widow. And to go to wrongdoers and perpetrators of violence and say, "No, that's wrong."

### **Question 6:**

#### **Is understanding Roman slavery important to understanding Paul's letter to Philemon?**

**Student:** The issue of slavery is a pretty prominent issue in the book of Philemon, Reggie. How important is it for us to understand the nature of first-century slavery when we are trying to understand this letter to Philemon?

**Dr. Kidd:** It's a good question, Wes, but in the first place... here is where it's helpful to understand the difference between their world and our world. For Paul, actually, the institution of slavery isn't under discussion at all. It is for us because of our cultural

history. But for Paul, this is really more about a relationship between two men and the household that they live together in. It helps us, I think, to set aside some of our own cultural issues, to understand what slavery did mean in that world. That it was much more of a household relationship in the first place. It was often a means of people who had no means of support, no social safety net, to have protection and to have a place, to have a name that they wouldn't otherwise have had. For many people, being a slave was their status. And it helps us a lot to not hyperventilate when we see Paul accepting slavery to understand the nature of slavery in his day and see how different it was from the way slavery developed in the West subsequently.

**Student: Reggie, Wes' question brought something to my mind and that is, if it's important to us to have a more correct understanding of first-century slavery, how important is it in general to understand the historical background of letters? Is that something we should do for every book of the Bible?**

**Dr. Kidd:** Well, Christopher, as much as we can, sure. Now, we believe in the sufficiency of Scripture. We believe Scripture is the authority and only Scripture is the authority. But that doesn't mean that we ignore... well, the very fact that we believe that Scripture is sufficient means we have that obligation to find out, as much as we can, what it said in the first place to its listeners. And what our view of Scripture obligates us to is to take our bearings as to what it means for us on the basis of what it originally meant to the people that it was written to in the first place.

So, everywhere we can we want to get as close to hearing it and reading it through their ears and through their eyes. For instance, if you read the letter to the Galatians, you realize pretty quickly that Paul is upset. And you don't have to have been a product of the first-century to understand that when Paul says, "Oh, you foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you?" But if you read contemporary letters you get a deeper sense, a more immediate sense of Paul's anger because you realize that after you read a few letters contemporary to Paul that the custom was that before you got around to the point of your letter, you know, after you said, "from so-and-so, to so-and-so," that you would include some sort of a blessing or prayer for their well-being. And pagans as well as Jews and Christians did this sort of thing. But Paul eliminates that word of blessing or prayer and goes straight for, "You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you?" And recognizing that Paul is dropping out a culturally expected wish or prayer or blessing helps us to see just how upset he is about what is happening in Galatians. Now we can get on his wavelength anyway but closer attention to the cultural situation that he wrote into and the etiquette of letter writing makes us see that he really is slapping them upside the head.



### Question 7:

#### Why did Paul try to persuade rather than command Philemon to free Onesimus?

**Student:** Reggie, in some places in Paul's letters he just comes out and issues a command to the people he is writing a letter to. But in this book, in Philemon, he is more reserved. He is attempting to persuade Philemon to do what is right. What does Paul gain by doing it this way? Why doesn't he just tell Philemon what to do? And I guess, where is the line that one crosses between just persuading someone to do it and giving them the choice and crossing that line and becoming manipulative?

**Dr. Kidd:** It's a good question, Wes. You know, for anybody that is in pastoral leadership... I'm sorry, anybody that is in any sort of responsible role where your job is to get "X" done that involves getting other people to do it or to help you on your behalf, you have to ask the question, "how do I lead," as opposed to, "how do I manipulate?" For Paul, he has a pretty keen sense that it's not enough for somebody to say the right words or to do the right thing. There really has to be an existential or personal ownership. It's like, for me as a teacher, I am far happier when I take you right up to the place where you feel like you figured it out. Instead for me just telling you the answer and you remembering it. You really own it better when I put the comma there and you've said, "Well, if that's true then..." And then you land exactly where I was hoping you would. So, it's Socratic method.

And I think a lot of what Paul is doing is teaching by setting the stage for Philemon and helping him to consider all the contingencies that are in play here. From what he has already done to benefit his community, to what spiritual debt he owes to Paul, to the folks that are watching, to the consideration you know of just asking them to consider God's providence. Maybe what started out to be really a bad situation, maybe God was involved in this. And maybe you have the opportunity to have a relationship with a guy that just couldn't have meant that much to you, even though he was in your household. And now he's more than just a member of your earthly household but he is your brother forever. And he wants to give Philemon this cluster, this complex of considerations but respect the fact that Philemon's the one who's got to really own this decision.

And what's really interesting is that Paul kind of hints... well, not hints but he implies that there's a right thing to do and then says, "And I know that you will do even more than what is right." And what's been so intriguing over the centuries about the letter to Philemon is that commentators still don't know what he was asking him to do. And there is just a little bit of mystery here in which I think Paul was really trusting in the power of the regenerate heart. You know, he wrote Colossians at right about the same time he wrote Philemon and he wrote it to the church here in Colossae. And he talks about wisdom and how Christ is our wisdom. I think he sees here an opportunity for Philemon to more than do the right thing. I think he sees the opportunity for Philemon to step

further into his own union with Christ, to, his own understanding of what it is for him to be bought with a price and to work out what that means for his relationship with somebody else.

### **Question 8:**

#### **Should we adopt the same strategies of persuasion that Paul used with Philemon?**

**Student:** I guess my question is, can we use Paul's method here as kind of a map or, for lack of a better word, a formula of how to lead people when we need to get them to do what we do and influence them as opposed to providing them incentives to do something whether that be positive or negative, cause that can seem to go in a bad place and become manipulation. But maybe we just try to paint a picture for them of what is best for all parties involved?

**Dr. Kidd:** Well, Wes, the idea of painting a picture is a good one, I think. You're right, there is not a formula here but part of what Paul winds up doing in the appeal he gives here in verses 17 through 19 is painting a picture of the gospel in his own life and asking Philemon to consider how he can tell the same story in his own life. I mean, the language here is really extraordinary. He says, "If he has done you any wrong, any injustice, or owes you anything..." and the root word there goes up in theology of justification, that we have wronged God and God has to bring us and right-wise us with respect to his law. And he says "If he's wronged you in any way or owes you anything..." and I think Philemon is supposed to get the idea of, "Okay, he wronged me but I wronged God; he owes me but how much more do I owe God?" And Paul says, "Put it on my tab; impute it to me," and uses the same root that uses in Romans to talk about God not imputing or holding against us our own unrighteousness but imputing to us the righteousness of Christ. So, Paul is kind of stepping in between and saying, "I am willing to do for him what Jesus did for you and me." And that is to bear the cost. And then he says, "Not to mention, you owe me your very self."

This is sort of a New Testament version of the Old Testament's saying, "You were slaves in Egypt weren't you? And how were you going to get out of that? You weren't, were you? That's why I had to come with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm and I brought you out. Now you're mine. Now, look around you. Are there slaves in the land? How would people who had been brought out of slavery treat people who were enslaved?" Then he uses the same logic for widows and orphans. "You were orphans; I became your father. You were widows and I brought you into a relationship with myself. Now, look around you at the widows and the orphans and care for them the way I cared for you."

And this is what I was talking about before when I said Paul is giving Philemon the opportunity to take a step deeper into his own union with Christ in his death and

resurrection in him. And to basically consider in Paul's willingness to take the rap for Onesimus, the fact that Jesus had taken the rap for him, Philemon, and then to give up whatever Onesimus might owe him. And beyond that, to embrace him as a brother. I think there is just incredible pastoral wisdom here and it's a great study in leadership that doesn't cross the line into crass manipulation, and just using peer pressure, and just ordering him around. But really wanting Philemon himself to own the right decision and a decision that's beyond right but which is really about stepping into a whole new eternal family relationship with a brother he wouldn't have had, but now he has forever.

### Question 9:

#### What gave Paul the confidence to use such a risky strategy with Philemon?

**Student:** Reggie, you mentioned that Paul has confidence in the regenerate heart of Philemon and you mentioned how important the gospel and its implications are. But this still looks like Paul really is running the risk. This form of leadership implies a risk that in some cases people blew it or in some cases, people don't see the implication. Is there anything else you would mention that helped Paul take this risk or other things leaders today should keep in mind?

**Dr. Kidd:** Well, two things come to mind, Christopher. One is that this is not done in a social vacuum. This is done in relationship. This is done between a man who led one man to the Lord and then leads another man to the Lord. And there is a bond between them that's more than just words on a page. And two, there is just this real understanding of the change that takes place in people and trusting to God to work in such a way that people will be able to have been changed to live out their new identities.

I mean, there is this lovely thing that happens that we talked about in the lesson about the naming of Onesimus, and sort of his getting renamed from "not useful" to now "useful," only with a word that would have sounded like "well-Christed." Then the call for Philemon to do a benefit to Paul using the same Greek root that is actually underneath Onesimus' name. There is this beautiful way that Paul has of appealing to truth and saying, "You guys are different people because of the gospel. Now, work it out as to what that means." The wisdom here that we should take away, I think, is this profound sense that I as a pastoral leader can't make things happen but I can lay out the case for you as best I can and then trust God, trust the God who changed you and the God who, like he intimates here, is always at work. You know, maybe God is the one who set this whole thing up.

I can't not think about the fact that it was in the same time frame that Paul wrote this that he wrote Colossians where he talks about Christ's lordship over supernatural powers in his letter. And then, the fact that he wrote Ephesians where, for the first three chapters basically, he is more praying his case than arguing his case. And I can imagine Paul on

his knees as this letter is going. It had to take several days for the letter to get from Rome to Colossae. And I can imagine every waking hour Paul on his knees, asking the Lord to work in these guys' hearts. I think, you are asking for what sort of pastoral take away from this and there is a basic trust that God works, the basic trust that God really makes people new. And the exciting thing about being in pastoral ministry is that we get to go to people and remind them of who they are now and then trust them to God and then our role becomes what I know Paul was doing: praying and asking the Lord to work. To me, that's one of the things that is most needed in reclamation in our day is pasturing that is done on our knees instead of just from the pulpit, and just in the counseling office. Pulpits are absolutely critical. Counseling rooms are absolutely critical but I think we are going to be really surprised when we get to glory and see how much the kingdom has been built from people on their knees asking the Lord to work in powerful ways.

### **Question 10:**

#### **Did Onesimus have the responsibility to make reparations to Philemon?**

**Student:** Philemon makes the point really clear that we should show mercy to one another. But where is the place for justice or for reparation? Didn't Onesimus have the responsibility to pay back whatever wrong he had done to Philemon?

**Dr. Kidd:** Well, Christopher, I think you're right. When I have done somebody wrong... And it's hard to read between the lines here and know exactly what had gone on and we acknowledge that in the lesson. But it does appear that Onesimus had wronged Philemon somehow. Whether through malice or through oversight, somehow he had disadvantaged Philemon and something is owed. As a believer, it is my obligation to try and set things right with somebody, and I think the stipulations in the book of Exodus 22 when it talks about restitution, those principles do carry over. Where it is my responsibility, as best I can, when I have wronged somebody, to seek to make that right. And so, I think part of what Paul was doing is sending Onesimus back so that he can come to his master and say, "I have wronged you. Will you forgive me and can I make it right with you?"

### **Question 11:**

#### **Do we always have to show mercy when we are wronged?**

**Student:** Reggie, what about times when we are wronged by someone? Do we have to always apply mercy or is there a place where we can call for justice?

**Dr. Kidd:** Well, I think, trying to take our bearings as much as we can from Philemon, I think the own-ness on us is to consider whether, in a particular situation, we can't let it

go. At some level, the last thing any of us wants to do is to demand justice because who is totally just? What the gospel demands that we consider is if we were to go before God and say, "I want you to do what's fair. I want you to do what's right. I want you to do what's just," God would say, "Well, let's talk about that." What do you think perfect justice would do to you? And I think, we are supposed to recognize that if God would be totally fair, totally just, and totally right for God to just smash us like a bug. But what he did out of his mercy and his compassion was send his Son to pay the penalty so that right would be done. And so that which is fair, that which is just is done, and that our sins are punished. And it is our primary responsibility to treat other people as in need of the same sort of forgiveness that was extended to us. And so, where we can just take it, I think Paul would say, "Take it."

Now, there is a larger social network to consider. There is the need for the value of property to be upheld and maintained for the social good. There is the need for human life to be valued for the social good. And so, it's not for me to go to the courts and to the police and just say, "Let everybody off and, please, there should be no consequences for somebody who does a crime against me." And I think, it's one of the things that God has built in. As you move from Romans 12 to Romans 13, you can see this, and it might be worth just taking a quick look. Paul talks about our responsibility at the end of Romans 12, and our responsibility is to "repay no one evil for evil, but take thought for what's noble in the sight of all, if at all possible. So far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God. For it is written, 'Vengeance is mine. I will repay,' says the Lord." We don't go get paybacks. We put things in the Lord's hands. And in fact, "If your enemy is hungry then feed him; if he is thirsty, give him drink." In other words, model for him what was done for you. If God wants to exact justice, he can take care of exacting justice. My job is to reflect the other side of things, the mercy that was extended to me.

You know, what's great for Paul is, in Romans 3, he talked about the way that, by offering his Son as an atonement, justice has been taken care of, even there, even if I don't see the payment. "For by doing so you will heat burning coals upon his head. Don't be overcome by evil but overcome evil with good." My job is to seek to overcome evil with good. Now, he turns to Romans 13 and says, "Wes, Christopher, Reggie, you can do this," because in this world of "already, not yet," where the fall continues, even though there is going to be an ultimate accounting at the end of time, I know that if I just let things unfold and if there are no social controls, we are just going to have the same sort of situation you had before the flood in Genesis 6–9. So, what I am doing, and it's what God did all the way back in Genesis 9 after the flood, I'm setting governmental agencies and authorities. And I am going to put responsible adults on the playground and their job is to tell bullies, "No." And the reason that you and I don't have to fight for our rights and scrap for every bit of justice that we can get is, well, in the first place, we know the Lord is going to cover it. But in terms of just living together in a fallen world, we need to know that there are going to be responsible authorities who will come and who will exact a measure of justice.

And that is the positive side of what's going on here in Romans 13, where he says that we are supposed to pay taxes, we are supposed to honor governing authorities, and that God has not given the sword to the state for nothing. He has given the sword to the state because they are to be — and it's an interesting word he uses — a “minister” on his behalf, whether they know him or not, whether they know it's his law that is ultimately at the center of the universe. They, to the extent that they promote good and punish evil, they are his servants. And our job is to let them do their job.

### **Question 12:**

#### **How does Paul bring the gospel to bear on Onesimus?**

**Student:** Reggie, we've talked a lot already about how Paul lays out the big picture of the gospel for Philemon. What does Paul do for Onesimus? How does Paul bring the gospel to bear on him?

**Dr. Kidd:** Christopher, that's a great question and it's easy to get preoccupied with Philemon and his responsibility as a slave owner. But Onesimus is an important player here and we were talking a few minutes ago about the need when I have done somebody wrong to be willing to go own up, ask forgiveness, and offer whatever I can do to make the situation right. And that's what Onesimus is being asked to do. And we have to remember this is a very young Christian. He has just gotten the gospel. We don't know long he has been with Paul but probably not a real long time. And Paul is crediting a great deal to him and his understanding that his identity is new, and that he was useless and now he is useful, and now he is a brother to this man that he must have thought... well, we don't know what he would of thought of Philemon but know he is being asked to think of this guy who was just his master to be his brother as well and you know, Onesimus is going back. Paul expresses a great deal of confidence in Philemon's doing the right thing. But Onesimus, new to the faith, he knows that there really ought to be some consequences for what he has done and he is being asked to trust that this man who was simply his lord — with a capital “L” — will now embrace him and not abuse him. And if he were to exact some sort of retribution... and you know, what's he thinking about all of that? I just don't know. It's a call for a guy who is just a young Christian to be very brave as well as to be very humble. And this is a huge step, I am sure, for Onesimus to take.

### **Question 13:**

#### **Do Paul's teachings on slaves and masters apply to other types of relationships?**

**Student:** Reggie, do Paul's teachings on slaves and masters apply to any other types of relationships?

**Dr. Kidd:** Yeah, Wesley, I think we're all going to be in relationships in different points in our lives where we are on the Philemon end and more on the Onesimus end, more in the position of power and strength or more in the position of weakness. You know, we're different places in our growth in Christ, Philemon being the mature elder brother and Onesimus being the younger brother. And part of the joyful challenge of living is making the leap from this text and the kind of relational grid that it's presupposing and the text of lives and the relational context in which we live. And I think an imaginative, faithful reading of this text is really important.

And just to hit again some of the major points that we tried to stress in the lesson, what is it to know that even when bad things have happened that it's really God who is at work and he has ultimately good things in view? As Paul will say in Philippians that he understands that God is at work to will and work in our lives and that he will see us through to the day of Christ Jesus. There is nothing that comes into our lives that he is not going to use to our benefit. There is the whole matter of the renaming, or in Onesimus' case, coming in Christ to live up to a name that had just been seemingly arbitrarily imposed upon him. And now that he belongs to Christ, he really can be a useful, productive bearer of the image of God, something that would have been a total mystery to him before.

And you know, all of us can think about our names. Christopher means "Christ-bearer." How sad it would be if you didn't know the living Christ and you didn't have him to bear out into the world around you? And you know, I think that could be a source of meditation for you from time to time. My name, Reggie, is a diminutive of "king" and, well, there are different ways to be a king. There is pride, there is arrogance, there is thinking of yourself more than you are but then there is also what it is to bear the image of God who made us for nobility and for dignity, and who has given me the responsibilities. He has given me a little piece of the turf of his creation, beginning with me, and my family relationships, my friend relationships, my church, my work. In all those places, I'm called now in Christ to do what Adam and Eve were originally called to do and that is be God's sub-kings, under him and to do good. We all are to get our bearings from this way that Paul lays his life out in the shape of a cross and says, "If he's done you any wrong, put it on my account." We are to be looking for ways that we can go into the world and seek the good news that God has sent his Son to bear our sins and he wants us to be ones who bring hope to situations where people are at odds with each other and where reconciliation doesn't look like it's possible.

And we are supposed to be like Paul and see if we can bring people together to talk through things. And if I am in relationships where I am more like Philemon, I really think that I am supposed to count wrong that was done to me as something that I put on Christ's shoulders, and not exact vengeance. And when I have done wrong, as Onesimus had done, I am to own and I'm to go seek to make things right. If I am in the power position that Philemon is in, I am to see that position as not to my advantage but to other people's advantage. And if I'm in Onesimus of being more of a servant, I am to be the best servant that I can. I am to seek to please, not my human master, but my Lord Jesus himself. So, I think there is plenty of takeaways here.

**Question 14:**

**Do the principles explained in Philemon apply to our relationship with unbelievers?**

**Student:** Reggie, you mentioned that this takes place in the context of two believers. How would the message of this book apply to people who are in those over-under relationships when one of the parties was an unbeliever?

**Dr. Kidd:** Yeah, Christopher, when the other party is not a believer, I can't assume that they are going to do the right thing. And I still have to know that the God who spun the earth into existence and the God who was not surprised and shocked when Adam and Eve fell, and the God who decided that he wasn't going to let the universe just spin out of control but decided that he was going to redeem all things, I have to believe that the God who allows evil to happen so that a greater good can occur through the evil motives of evil people, I have to believe he is able to work in that situation. I cannot presume, well, I should never presume on God's redeeming grace on anybody, but when I talk about trying to reconcile with a believer, I really can believe that the Holy Spirit is going to be at work in that other person, to soften their hearts, to let them know, because we are both in submission to God's Word, what their responsibility is here. And with an unbeliever, I have to be much more on my guard. I think it's very important in those relationships when I have to work things out with an unbeliever to be very much in fellowship, in counsel, in accountability with relationships with fellow believers so that I can get counsel that's beyond my own.

**Question 15:**

**How does Paul's message apply to Christians who are mistreated by unbelievers?**

**Student:** How would we apply the message of Philemon to people who are in those over-under relationships if they were being terribly treated by an unbeliever?

**Dr. Kidd:** Well, here, Christopher is where the principles of justice and my responsibility to be an advocate on your behalf come into play. Part of the beauty of Christian community, especially if you are in submission to a council of elders, and you know there are different ways that churches govern themselves but there should be, in any church, a counsel of wisdom where I can take my situation and go receive wise counsel and protection. The Lord himself will ultimately be my champion and sometimes there is not going to be a human agency, or a brother, or a sister, or a counsel that can come along and come between me and somebody who is doing me wrong. When that's not in place, all I can do is say, "I know that my redeemer lives and on the last day I will see him in



the flesh and he will make all things right.” But between now and then, where I can find counsel I should go seek counsel, and where I am able to come alongside my brother who is being mistreated and I have the opportunity, well, I have the responsibility to see that right is done on his or her behalf as best I can.

### Question 16:

#### What does the book of Philemon have to say about guilt and shame?

**Student:** Reggie, what does the book of Philemon have to say about those who are just struggling with guilt or shame because of sin or whatever circumstances in their lives?

**Dr. Kidd:** I think, Wes, that Paul has some really helpful things to say about people who are still crippled by the question of how much of the burden for their own sin they carry. Like does God still look at them as guilty? And to people who feel intense shame, like they just feel undressed and embarrassed all the time. I think in the first place of the lovely thing that he does with Onesimus where he sees this man with a new identity, with a name that he couldn't live up to, and now he is invited to see himself as a new person in Christ. He can go to Philemon and offer to make right whatever he can precisely because he knows that God has made things right for him and that Christ paid a penalty for him. So he can go, not as a guilty person who is wondering if the jury is out on him, but he can go as a redeemed free person who bears no guilt. And he can be, at the heart of who he is, unaffected by whether Philemon responds well or responds poorly because he knows that the one judge who really counts has already brought in a verdict and it's not guilty.

On the matter of shame, which I think is this sense of just feeling just like embarrassed and undressed and dirty like everybody is looking at me and I'm just ugly and I can just never be good enough, there too the whole notion that Onesimus has been renamed and been given a value is above and beyond anything that he could ever imagine for himself. And has been, to go over to Colossians, the letter that was written about the same time, he has been clothed now with the righteousness of Christ and God doesn't look at him in way that would bring him shame.

And another aspect of shame is just not feeling like you belong. You are just totally on your own; you're just totally lonely. You're alone in that you feel like everybody just sees all the ugly but you don't feel like you belong anywhere. The theology that is underlying this is that not only has Christ paid the penalty to take your guilt but he has made you a member of his family. You belong to him. He is your elder brother and you've got a place at his table if at nobody else's. Hopefully, Philemon is going to get it and Philemon is going to make a wide spacious place for him back in his house, and will welcome him and lavish love on him. But, the fact is, because Onesimus has been made new, he is not ultimately dependent upon whether Philemon is going to get that or not.

So, I think for those of us who will take the time to go deep into this letter and sit before it and really consider its implications for who we are, new in Christ, and especially reading it alongside Colossians and Ephesians, there is plenty, there is a world of stuff to be said for those of us who tend to be crippled by feeling like we are still guilty and like there is still an angry judge that is just waiting up there to get us. And Philemon, Colossians, and Ephesians say, “No, there’s not,” and that we are seen as being righteous in Christ, and therefore we can live positively and boldly. We can live out of grace and live out of gratitude and not guilt. And for those of us who just feel like we are ugly, not just guilty but ugly, twisted and good for nothing, this letter, along with Colossians and Ephesians tell us, “Oh no, not only has mercy been extended to us but the welcome mat is there at the Father’s house. And he has given us his name and he has shared his inheritance with us. There is a place at his table for us.”

### Question 17:

#### How does our identity in Christ motivate us to reconcile?

**Student:** Reggie, Paul seems to be a little ironic, or in an unanticipated way, he seems to say that because your identity is a given that would be motivation to try to reconcile. That seems to be at odds with how things often feel where the offer of an identity motivates you to reconcile. What does Paul want us to carry away from this?

**Dr. Kidd:** Yeah Christopher, I think you are kind of at the heart of the mystery of the way that Paul operates. For him, there is the statement of an indicative. This is what has happened for you. And then, following that indicative there is an imperative. You don’t do your duty in order to make something happen. You do your duty because something wonderful has happened for you. So again, it’s a motivation out of gratitude and not guilt. It’s not in order to get but it’s a motivation that comes out of a gift that has already been given. I’m not sure if that’s what you had in mind or not.

**Student:** It’s just interesting that for the people in this relationship, for Philemon and Onesimus, before the letter was written they probably could have both imagined what the one should be doing. And Paul doesn’t appeal necessarily to those things at all. Rather he lays out this gospel picture.

**Dr. Kidd:** Yeah, and then asks them both to take their bearings from that and to figure out how the relationship should be different because of that. Not what the other guy should be doing but how I fit into the story of Jesus, and how he is working his design out into my life and the world around me.

It takes a lot of pressure off. It means my responsibility is not so much to worry about you because I can’t control you. My responsibility is to worry about my stewardship of me, my stewardship of what the gospel story means for me, and what the presence of

Jesus in my life is. What today's measure of living in union with him, of stepping into the death of baptism in him, and the life of coming up out of the waters in him would be. And then letting the Lord go between me and the other person and see if he can bring us together in such a way that I could never do by just trying to control the situation myself.

**Student:** That reminds me of something you mentioned in the other lesson, and that is that those who focus on Christ and things above actually are more effective in their earthly relationships. And this seems to be an example of that principle.

**Dr. Kidd:** Yeah, Christopher, and I think that's why Philemon is such a gift to us, because that great teaching that is there and the letter to the Colossians that could be stuff that you just sort of put up on the mantlepiece and say, "Ooh, that's really kind of nice and exalted Christology, you know, a wonderful mindset to have." And miss that even in Colossians, Paul means for that great truth to get worked out in the reality and the stuff of normal life. But it becomes inescapable that we are supposed to work that stuff out in the real stuff of life when we see Philemon coming alongside the instructions to masters and servants. And those matters that even in terms of Colossians, could just be sort of kept at a principal level, they become flesh. You see the wit, you see the subtlety of Paul's argument, you see Paul's willingness to take people way down the road of making responsible situation but then finally saying, "Now you step up and you do the right thing. But not just the right thing, the more than right thing and more than that, for the right reason in light of all the stuff I have said in Colossians." And that's a great point, Christopher.

### **Question 18:**

#### **Should we limit our pursuit of reconciliation with unbelievers?**

**Student:** Reggie, we talked about reconciling with unbelievers. What are the limits of reconciliation? What does it look like when we try to reconcile denominations? What does it look like when we work with people who proclaim the name of Christ but aren't living Christianity out? And there are other examples. What are the limits in those circumstances?

**Dr. Kidd:** Thanks, Wesley. It's a great chance to offer some important qualifications here because Paul is dealing with brothers that he believes are in submission to his own teaching. And beyond that, that apostolic truth of Jesus, who he is, what the point of his coming was, the grace that is ours. In reality, as church history has gone on, not only do we see that Augustine's sense that the city of man was just going to become more and more the city of man, more and more a corrupt place that needs the presence of the city of God to be a counter veiling force. The city of God, the people of God are deeply divided on what it is to be confessors of Christ. There is a sad range of willingness to submit to the teaching authority of Paul in the New Testament. There are vast swaths of the church that feel that it's not necessary to confess Orthodox Christianity and have crazy ideas that

Paul would and other apostolic writers would frankly not recognize as being the faith. And that's why we have books like 2 Peter and Jude so that we understand that we have a responsibility to have a more prophetic stance. When the name of Christ is being claimed and yet the reality is people are not in submission to him and with folks in churches like that we can find ourselves being allies in some moral issues like abortion, slave trafficking, the need for help relief in Africa, and that sort of thing but we're not on the same page in terms of the gospel that we are seeking to proclaim.

### Question 19:

#### Should we limit our pursuit of reconciliation with believers?

**Student:** How about between true Christians when their relationships become so fractured that they are tempted to lose hope for reconciliation? How does Paul's message to Philemon offer hope? Or what are the limits of the hope for people still living in a fallen world?

**Dr. Kidd:** One of the things, I think, that's helpful to observe is the way Paul walked through difficult relationships. And one, in particular, that sort of abuts Philemon is the strained relationship between Paul and Barnabas. Going all the way back to the 1st missionary journey where Barnabas, who was uncle to John Mark, wanted to take John Mark along on the second missionary journey when John Mark had abandoned the mission on the 1st missionary journey. And Paul was not willing to take John Mark along on the 2nd missionary journey. The book of Acts was clear there was no small disturbance over how to handle that, and these two brothers, they walked away from each other. And what happened was they didn't force a closure at that point that could only have been painful. They let each other go and my sense would be, they entrusted one another to the Lord and said, "We can't work this out now and yet we're not going to let the mission just come to a halt, we're not going to call each out and force everybody to try to throw one of us out." What happened was that Barnabas took John Mark back to Cyprus where they had gone in the first place in the first missionary journey. And Paul picked up Silas and launched the second missionary journey to the north through Asia Minor. And what happened was because these brothers didn't force the church to come to a conclusion of who was right and who was wrong, they wound up with a ministry that proliferated, so that you had basically two missionary journeys going on at the same time.

It abuts Philemon because in Colossians 4 we find Paul making affectionate remarks about John Mark who was the source of the division among them in the first place. Colossians 4:10... it's interesting because in the previous verse he links this letter up with Onesimus. I'll go back to verse 8, "I've sent Tychicus to you for this very purpose, that you may know how we are and that he may encourage your hearts and with him, Onesimus." So, the scenario here is the estranged slave carrying the letter from Paul back to his master along with this delegation that's bringing the letter to the Colossians, that is the letter to the Colossians to the church in Colossae. "And with him, Onesimus the faithful and beloved brother who is one of yourselves. They will tell you of everything that has taken place here. Aristarchus," — now I'm on to verse 10 — "my fellow prisoner

greet you and Mark, the cousin of Barnabas concerning whom you have received instructions. If he comes to you, receive him.” The sense that we get here is that there has been, somewhere along the way without there being an explanation of it, some sort of reconciliation. And that now, years later, Paul sees John Mark as being a part of the fellowship, a part of the koinonia, a part of the mission. And what is honorable and noble here is that Paul and Barnabas just gave the Lord time to work things out.

**Student:** Well, Reggie, you mentioned that sometimes relationships just take time and that part of managing that is just to trust that God can work in time. It is interesting that you point out that John Mark is mentioned there with Onesimus verse by verse. I bet that also pointed out a lot to Philemon and the church that Paul wasn't asking them to do something he himself wasn't modeling.

**Dr. Kidd:** That's a good point.

### **Question 20:** **How can we rightly interpret God's providence?**

**Student:** You know Reggie, the circumstances surrounding the book of Philemon with Onesimus' arrival and his appeal, Paul seems to have been able to understand exactly what to do in this situation and what God seemed to have in mind in terms of his providence. How can we as modern Christians rightly interpret God's providence and know how to act in certain situations?

**Dr. Kidd:** It's funny that sometimes you kind of feel like, wouldn't you love to have Paul alongside you, just to say, "Here's what's going on." Although sometimes when I read how much he can get in your face, I think, well maybe it's just as well. But yes, what I love about Paul is that here is a guy who is totally alive to what is going on around him and at the same time he is so just because he knows that he is living under heavens that are habituated, that Jesus is sitting on the throne. Paul's own life is hid with him and Jesus is coming back and he is going to make all things right. The demons, the hosts of the Devil's minions are pacified. They can't do anything more than the Lord of glory and Lord of history will allow. And Paul has this sense of everything that happens is in his sovereign hands.

You are right. We don't have the mind of Christ in the same way that Paul had it because, well, none of us should claim to be an apostle with a capital "A." And I get really suspicious when somebody tells me they've had the kind of visions that Paul said he had in 2 Corinthians and all that stuff. But Paul does say that we have the mind of Christ and all wisdom has been given to us in Christ and he does so in Colossians. He puts each of us in a place where he has promised to be with us, to be adequate for us, to not put

temptation in front of us that is not common to man from which there is not an escape. And to give us a competency to do what he has called us to do.

The thing that is so remarkable about this cluster of letters: Philemon, Colossians, and Ephesians is that I think he gives us a sense of perspective as we seek to interpret providence. That involves prayer, that involves being in submission to his church under officers who carry out the apostolic prophetic function and who pastor and teach, where we are going to get the challenge to live and love, and in holiness to find counsel so that we can discern what our situation is before God and how we can live in it wisely.

So, it's a great question. And what Paul wants us to do is to see every relationship as an opportunity to live out our new identity in Christ, every situation as being an opportunity to ask the question, "Well, why did the Lord put this particular situation in front of me and how can I see his goodness and his providence even in the things that don't look so good now? And how can I live as one who has had every wrong I've done paid for, every obligation I owe paid for? And then how can he use me to express his desire to bring that same sort of forgiveness, that same sort of healing power, that same sort of reconciling power of relationship, how can I bring that to other people?"

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