

Gospel-Shaped Relationships

Philemon

By Rev. Billy Dempsey

We turn our attention this evening to Paul's letter to his friend of Philemon. Before we do so, let's go to the Lord in prayer.

Father, we need to hear from You. We are insufficient of ourselves. We are dust, and You have made abundant provision because You have spoken to us. You have spoken to us in the prophets. In the latter days, You spoke to us in Your Son, who is the radiance of Your glory and the exact representation of Your being. Father, thank You. Thank You for the ministry of Your Spirit who brings us into understanding all that You have said, who brings us into remembrance of all that You have taught us. Holy Spirit, work among us now. Make our hearts soft and our eyes open and our ears attentive to what You would say to us from Your Word. Hear us, Father, as we make our prayer in Jesus' name and for His sake. And all God's people said, amen.

Let me draw your attention to the book of Philemon. It's twenty-four, twenty-five verses, and we will read them all because it all sits together as one whole. You'll find that on page 1000 of your pew Bible. Please give attention as I begin the reading of God's Word:

Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother,

To Philemon our beloved fellow co-worker and Apphia our sister and Archippus our fellow soldier, and the church in your house:

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

I thank my God always when I remember you in my prayers, because I hear of your love and of the faith that you have toward the Lord Jesus and for all the saints, and I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective for the full knowledge of every good thing that is in us for the sake of Christ. For I have derived much joy and comfort from your love, my brother, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you.

Accordingly, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do what is required, yet for love's sake I prefer to appeal to you — I, Paul, an

old man and now a prisoner also for Christ Jesus — I appeal to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I became in my imprisonment. (Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful to you and to me.) I am sending him back to you, sending my very heart. 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, but I preferred to do nothing without your consent in order that your goodness might not be by compulsion but of your own free will. For this perhaps is why he was parted from you for a while, that you might have him back forever, no longer as a slave but more than a slave, as a beloved brother — especially to me, but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord.

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

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

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

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

All men are like grass and all their glory is like the flower of the field; the grass withers and the flower fades, but the Word of our God stands forever.

Let's think about the situation that Paul is writing in. Paul is writing to a friend, a dear friend. Paul never planted the church at Colossae. Philemon lives in Colossae. He never went to Colossae, that is, to plant that church. If you go back to look at the history of the third missionary journey recorded in Acts chapter 19, you'll find in the years that Paul spend in Ephesus, teaching first in the synagogue and then in the lecture hall of Tyrannus, in verse 10 of chapter 19 Luke says that "the Gospel, the Word of the Lord, went to all Asia," that is, corresponding to modern Turkey, all of Asia in that time that Paul is ministering in Ephesus. Why is that? Because Ephesus was a busy cultural center and a commercial center. People were coming and going from Ephesus all the time. Colossae is located about ten miles away on the Lycus River.

Philemon would have had business, especially as we assume that he was a prosperous man, a man whose house was big enough to accommodate the meeting of the church at Colossae, a man who had slaves and other servants, a man who had room for a guest room. Philemon was some type of businessman,

a businessman who God had blessed with prosperity. As he encountered the Gospel taught by Paul in the lecture hall of Tyrannus perhaps, he came to faith. What did he do? When he finished his business, he went back home to Colossae and said, "You'll never believe what I heard! Let me tell you about it!" And he told his family and told his business associates and told the people that lived on the street. And other people coming and going from Colossae came back with the same story. "You'll never get what we heard this man saying. We were bored and the theatre was full and so we went to this lecture hall and there were people even standing outside the door and we could hear what he was saying. It was the most amazing thing we ever heard!" The Gospel went to Colossae and Philemon and Paul evidently, from the tone of this letter, became close friends.

Time passes, Paul is held in prison, most likely in Rome, and one of Philemon's servants, slaves, runs away. In fact, his name, Onesimus, means "useful." And apparently he was not a very useful servant because Paul said that. "He was useless to you before but now he's useful," Paul says, "both to you and to me." He was not a very good servant. He did not do very good work. He was not someone who earned, perhaps, his master's pleasure. But his master was going to require him to do the job as he was instructed to do. Onesimus evidently got tired of that and he left. He ran off. He went away to the big city. And what do you know, somehow in the mystery of God's providence, he encounters Paul. I'm not sure he was looking for Paul; maybe he was. How would a slave who seeks to disappear in the whole population of Rome, he would not be living very well, would he? He would be living almost hand to mouth. He would be living with the dregs of society. He wouldn't have a nice house even if he stole a sum of money from his master which apparently he must have because Paul offers to repay what may be owed. Maybe it was desperation that drove Onesimus to Paul. Maybe it was just the providence, the mystery of God's providence. In some way, in some fashion, somehow Onesimus, the fugitive slave, falls right into the lap of Paul the prisoner of Christ Jesus. And Paul introduces him to the Savior.

And that's where we find ourselves, as Paul writes a letter — not an epistle to the church but a letter to a friend. Perhaps it was read to the church since Paul sends greetings to the church, but this is a letter to a friend with a plea. You know, the Gospel gives shape to everything, doesn't it? There is no part of life — business, free time, the way we spend our money — there is no part of life that Jesus does not speak to, including our relationships. The Gospel gives shape to relationships.

I became a believer at about the age of fifteen. Well, it wasn't about, it was. I was fifteen years old. And sometime in that first year of my walk — now I had been going to Sunday school. I'm just a blockhead. I had grown up going to church and I knew the commandment, "Honor your father and mother," I knew that was the fifth commandment, but it just never dawned on me that that really constrained, somehow, my teenage years. I thought I was supposed to be wild and woolly and I was headed to be a wild and woolly teenager. And somebody pointed out to me

in that first year of the walk with the Lord, “Look, you've got to obey your parents. You've got the fifth commandment, ‘Honor your father and mother,’ but you've also got Ephesians chapter 6. It says, “Children obey your parents in the Lord.” And so I began to have to grapple with, “What does it mean?” Just to say “Yes sir,” and not offer a lot of alternatives and better ideas.

I remember the first time in a conversation with my daddy when he was saying, “This is the way. This is the way; walk ye in it. This is what you’re going to do.” And those were always conversations that I had lots of alternatives and lots of better ideas and lots of footnotes and lots of qualifications and lots of qualifiers. And he was accustomed to that. So you could see as he was saying, “This is what you’re going to do,” you could see him gearing up for battle. And I simply said, “Yes sir.” And he said, “Excuse me, excuse me? Is that it? Is that all?” “Yes sir, that's all.” I said, “Yes sir, that's all. You said do it; I'm going to do it.” “Really?” It was like years of stress drained from that poor man as he had — for this just one time, I wish I could say all of our interactions were like that! This one time at least I did it right. “Yes sir; I'll do what you say.”

But I did have to learn as we all learn that the Gospel gives shape to all of our relationships. That's what Philemon is learning right here. The Gospel gives shape to his relationships and Paul recognizes that, Philemon recognizes that. Look at those first two or three verses. Paul always ascribes grace and peace to you, grace that brings us to Christ; peace is the fruit of coming to Christ. I hate to read an epistle without drawing attention to that. Look what he says. “I thank my God always when I remember you in my prayers.” Why? “Because I hear of your love and the faith that you have towards the Lord Jesus and all the saints.” It's interesting that Ligon this morning brought up the John Calvin quote, that these two words, faith and love, can sum up all of godliness right here. Faith the first table of the law; love the second table of the law. And the Gospel has brought that fruit into Philemon's life so that his relationships really are bearing the imprint of both faith and love — faith and love towards the Lord Jesus and love towards the saints.

How, especially — look at verse 7. We'll come back to verse 6 in a minute. Look at verse 7. “For I have derived much joy and comfort from your love, my brother, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you.” Philemon lives, I believe, a sacrificial lifestyle. A man of means, a man whose business God has blessed, a man with excess who finds a way to make use of that excess for the good of the saints. There was much travel in those days. People used the Roman roads. And so here there would be believers who would be traveling and would hear through the grapevine that there's a believer with a gift of hospitality, a gracious man who makes his home available and they stay with him; a safe place for Christians to rest for the night. Certainly the church that meets in his home enjoys the benefit of this hospitality.

History tells us that in A.D. 60 there was a tremendous earthquake that shook the

Lycus Valley where Colossae is located. It was a devastating earthquake. Paul is writing after that time. Paul is writing in the early 60's, maybe around A.D. 62. Could it be that Philemon and his family are deeply involved in the relief effort giving relief to the saints, to other people as well, who have suffered so much in the losses incurred in that great earthquake? We don't know. It certainly happened and if Philemon is living that kind of lifestyle he would have had opportunity to give refreshing service to the saints who had lost so much. You see, Philemon gets it. Philemon gets that a Gospel lifestyle is a lifestyle of sacrificial living and sacrificial giving, a lifestyle of making available for the benefit and blessing of God's people everything that God has given to him. And so Philemon is a man who lives that way.

Look back with me at verse 6. Paul says — now the language here is difficult. Everybody can't agree on what Paul is really trying to say. He says, "I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective for the full knowledge of every good thing that is in us for the sake of the Gospel." What does Paul mean? I think that maybe Paul means that — Philemon, what you're doing in living this way, living this kind of sacrificial lifestyle, this kind of lifestyle that extends the goodness of God to other people, especially to the saints, you're working out the Gospel. You're giving feet to the Gospel. Not only do you proclaim the Gospel with your words but you also show the Gospel in your life and in the mercy you show, in the hospitality you extend. He's saying — you know, Paul in Ephesians chapter 2 as he talks about the essence of the Gospel, "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not yourself; it is the gift of God that no one can boast" — Ephesians chapter 2:8-9. The very next thing that he says is that God has prepared good works for us to do and because of the Gospel realities, faith given to us, we walk in the good works that God has prepared beforehand for us to do. I think he was thinking of Philemon right here. "Philemon, you're walking in the good works that God has prepared beforehand for you to do. You're showing not only by your words but also by your deeds, this is what the Gospel is — every good thing that is in us for the sake of Christ."

Philemon understands that and Paul is rejoicing in that and remembering that as he gets ready to make this unparalleled request because not only is the shape of Gospel living a sacrificial shape, when we give, but it's also a merciful shape, for we give mercy, we extend mercy. Just understand, Philemon has been wronged. Philemon has rights in any law court in the Roman Empire. Onesimus is his slave. Onesimus doesn't have the right to deprive Philemon of his labor. It doesn't work that way; not in Rome. There are very strict laws because so much of the Roman Empire is comprised of slaves and so there are very strict laws governing slave behavior and what to do when something like this happens, even to the point of capital punishment. Philemon understands that, Onesimus understands that, Paul understands that, and Paul's appeal to Philemon on behalf of Onesimus is, "Lay aside your rights and extend mercy. Lay aside your rights, the right given to you by law, and extend mercy to one who is now a brother."

Listen to what he's saying. He says, "For love's sake — you and I love each other and I'm asking, this is an errand of love. You and I love each other, Philemon, for love's sake, because of what's happened here with Onesimus and the love I have for him, I appeal to you. I appeal to you for my child," he says in verse 10. "Onesimus whose father I became in my imprisonment." He's telling us that Onesimus has come to faith. He says, "Formerly he was useless to you, but now he's indeed useful to you and to me because his conversion has made him a different character — a slave who was lazy has now become a slave who is industrious. Philemon, I see change in this man's character. He's not the same man who ran away from you. He's useful. He's beneficial. He's beneficial; he's been so helpful to me I would have been glad to keep him," Paul says in verse 13. "He would serve me. He would serve me. In fact, when he serves me, I think of you. I think of you, Philemon." The one who has run away, the one who is the criminal in this matter, the one who is the bad guy in this matter has come to faith and his life is different. His profession is matched by his words. He says, "Philemon, I want you to drop your legal rights." That's what he's asking. Look at verse 13. "I prefer to do nothing without your consent in order that your goodness (your goodness in not pursuing your rights in the court of law) might not be by compulsion but of your own free will." He's appealing to Philemon to extend mercy. "Philemon, have mercy."

What is Philemon's consent going to be based on? It's not going to be based on this letter because there has been a breach of faith, there has been a breach of trust, and Paul is appealing for Philemon's consent on the basis of what? On the basis of this — the restoration of the relationship broken by Onesimus' faithlessness. That relationship has got to be restored and that restoration is built on one thing — repentance. Onesimus has got to go back. Onesimus has got to go back to Philemon and say, not just say, but demonstrate repentance. What would keep Paul from just writing a letter? "Hey, guess who I met? Guess who I ran into? Guess who came by my rented out while I'm in prison chained to these Roman guards? It was your buddy, Onesimus, except I'll bet he's not your buddy right now because he told me what happened. Guess what? He came to faith, he's working with me right now, it's all good, don't worry about it." What would keep Paul from doing that? Because Onesimus has broken faith with his master. Onesimus has broken the relationship with his master. Paul is sending Onesimus back to repair what he has broken in his sin and looking to Onesimus, looking to Philemon on the basis of Onesimus' repentance to consent, drop the charges, and perhaps even let Onesimus serve Paul instead. It's a radical request between men who love each other. It's an unparalleled request on behalf of one who was a criminal and even in his journey back to Philemon could be picked up by the slave hunters and thrown in jail, no questions asked. It's a request to let the Gospel shape Philemon's response to one who has done him wrong.

It seems that that's the shape the Gospel gives to our relationships because there are those who we depend upon who do us wrong. There are those we

depend upon who misuse us and mistreat us. There are those that we depend upon who overlook us and take advantage of us, who break our trust and break our faith. There are those who we depend upon who leave us in the dust. How do we respond? We want to see them do the right thing, don't we? There's nothing unbiblical about that. That's why Paul is sending Onesimus back, for Onesimus to have the opportunity, having done the wrong thing, to do the right thing. But even now, Paul is preparing Philemon to show mercy. Why is he doing that? Justice always comes naturally to us, especially when we are the aggrieved party. We're all about justice when we are the aggrieved party. Mercy doesn't. We have to reach for mercy. We have to remember that we have received mercy in order to extend it.

I think that's what's behind Paul's comment right here around verse 19 when he says, "I'll repay any debt. I'll repay anything he owes — to say nothing of your owing me even your own self." I think he's reminding Philemon, "Philemon, you have received mercy. I was there. I watched it happen. I watched you receive mercy and I've seen your life since then." So he's calling on him to extend mercy because he knows that he has received mercy. But that's not going to be a quick transaction. No matter how repentant Onesimus shows himself to be and no matter how much the Gospel has changed and improved his character, Philemon's got to get there. You and I have to get there. Mercy doesn't come naturally to us. Justice comes naturally, grudging comes naturally, nourishing that hurt and cherishing that pain someone has caused us so we won't forget how wicked they are — those things come naturally to us, not mercy, not mercy. That's why Paul is giving this letter so that Philemon, as he sees Onesimus walk in the door, has the chance to read this missive from Paul and understand what might be a better response than his natural response would be.

Doesn't Paul model what he's asking for from Philemon? See what he says here. He says, "If he has wronged you at all, if he owes you anything, charge that to my account. I, Paul, write this with my own hand: I will repay it." Isn't he modeling the same thing that he has recognized Philemon doing elsewhere? Now he turns, and placing a very difficult assignment in Philemon's lap, he models the same kind of grace, the same kind of charity and the same kind of mercy. "Look, I'll pay. In whatever way he's wronged you, I will take responsibility to make it right. You won't be out. You won't be out. I'll make sure that it's all made right." That's the very kind of thing Philemon would do.

In another case, in another situation, see Philemon is accustomed to extending this kind of mercy as we saw in the early verses of this chapter, most likely to people he doesn't know, but this is close to home. This was a household servant. This was a servant in whom he had put his trust. This was somebody he relied upon, left his family with, left his goods unguarded around. This is a special case. We can extend mercy, we can live sacrificially to those out yonder, but the closer the crime comes to our own heart, the closer the relationship, the harder it is, isn't it, to extend that mercy — not a mercy that's just gauzy and not related to action,

but a mercy that's founded on repentance. I want to keep emphasizing that. Onesimus has got to demonstrate that his repentance is real, and when that's known, Paul calls upon Philemon to extend mercy.

What about us? Can we do that? Can we let the Gospel give that kind of shape to our relationships? Can we let the Gospel give us a heart of mercy to those who have wronged us? Can we let the Gospel give direction to us and by the Word of God give discernment to us? Can we look at the life of one who's wronged us and recognize this brother is repentant? This sister has dealt with the Lord, the Lord has dealt with them, and they really mean what they say? It takes a heart willing to look, it takes a heart willing to look beyond the hurt, it takes a heart willing to look beyond the pain, the disappointment, to see that words are matched with conduct and indeed God has done a work.

What do we do, what do we do in the case of those relationships that we suffer with, that we struggle with, relationships where trust has been broken and there's no evidence of repentance. Nobody's coming back to us saying, "Oh, I've made such a mess! Can you forgive me?" We're not hearing that. And Jesus tells us in Matthew chapter 5 around verse 43. Let me just read that for us. "You've heard it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven." Love our enemies, pray for those who have done us wrong, and pray for those who have persecuted us. All persecution doesn't happen out yonder; some persecution happens right close as people hurt us and gauge us and chew us up, break our hearts, and show no remorse, no pain, no interest in our wellbeing or the wellbeing of our families.

What do we do, what do we do while we're waiting for Onesimus to come back? We pray. We pray. We look for ways to do the loving thing, not the easy thing, not making it easy for them. You think Philemon is going to make it easy for Onesimus? Philemon can't see what he needs to see if he makes it easy for Onesimus. He's got to see what Onesimus' heart is made of. Sometimes we love our enemies and love is hard. We love our enemies by requiring them to do the right thing. Sometimes we love our enemies by requiring them to do the hard thing, the thing they don't want to do. Maybe that's the most loving thing for them, not to short that responsibility. You see, Onesimus can't just walk back in, waltz back in to Philemon's home and say, "Oh yeah, I'm back!" Philemon has got to see a new heart. Sometimes we've got to see a new heart to know if our relationship that has been severed can be restored. In the meantime, we can pray, we can ask God to do mighty things.

And as we deal with one another, we can do the loving thing, and we can not let our hearts be critical because we tend to go there. That's why Paul is leaning on Philemon. If you read this letter, he's leaning hard on him because it's better for Philemon to show mercy than it is to exact justice. It's better for his heart. If Onesimus were not a believer, it might be different. If Onesimus had no

indication that the Gospel's made a difference in his life we might have a different matter, but Onesimus is a new man. Paul is saying, "It's better for you, brother, to show mercy than to get justice because God has done the work in this man's heart."

What about us? Are we willing for the Gospel to give shape to our relationships? We can live sacrificially to those people out yonder and do things for them that they need help with, they can't do for themselves. As it comes closer to home, can the Gospel give the shape of mercy to the way we deal with one another, to the way broken relationships are restored? That's what Paul is urging his brother Philemon toward. That's what he would urge us toward as well. Let's go to the Lord in prayer.

Father, Your ways are not our ways. When we've been hurt we always want justice. We always want justice against those who have hurt us. When we're the criminal, we want mercy. Father, thank You for mercy, and indeed, thank You for justice as well. Father, give us grace, even as You gave Philemon grace, even as You gave Paul grace, give us grace to apply difficult truths, difficult standards, to painful relationships. Give us eyes to see the Gospel shape that our relationships assume as You work in our lives, Lord Jesus. Make us a people who smell like mercy because we're willing to show mercy when we recognize the work You've done in the heart of another. We pray for relationships tonight that are strained and broken. Would You work like You did between these men? Would You work? Would You bring restoration, bring a sense of sin and wrong, bring repentance, bring a repentance expressed and a relationship restored? Hear us, Father, as we make our prayer in Jesus' name and for His sake. Amen.

Let me ask you to stand up and receive the blessing of God and then we'll close our service with the singing of stanza four of hymn number 529.

And now may the Lord bless you and keep you, may the Lord make His face to shine upon you and be gracious to you, may the Lord Himself lift up His countenance upon you and give you His peace, both now and forevermore. Amen.

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