

Philemon

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[0:00] Good morning. Today we have the book of Philemon and I've decided to describe it as all about grace. Firstly, thank you Tony for doing the reading for me. But if you have your Bible with you please turn with me to Paul's letter to Philemon so that you can follow through with me this very important little book.

The good news this morning is that although I have chosen an entire book of the Bible for us to look at, it only has 25 verses so nobody needs to cancel lunch.

The book starts with a salutation, next Philemon's love and faith, followed by a plea from Paul for Onesimus. Philemon is one of those little books that we can easily pass over.

You are turning through the New Testament and you get to Titus, then Philemon, then Hebrews. But if two pages stick together, you can miss Philemon altogether.

But although it is one of the shortest books in the Bible, it is a remarkable little letter. It was written about AD 60 during Paul's first imprisonment in Rome, probably about the same time as Ephesians and Colossians were written.

[1:18] This little book shows us what happens when the Gospel leaves the pages of our Bibles and walks through our front doors. As I have said in previous weeks, Christianity is not simply about what we believe on Sunday.

The Gospel changes how we live on Monday and the rest of week. It changes how we treat our family, how we treat people who disappoint us, and how we deal with somebody who owes us something.

Also, how we respond when somebody has wronged us. And sometimes it changes how we see something about somebody we thought we already knew.

So here's the truth I want us to keep in mind as we work through this letter. Because the Gospel changes us, it must also change the way we see and treat other people.

We're going to see in this small book that this happened to three men. Paul, Onesimus and Philemon, who was probably a wealthy member of the Colossian Church.

[2:27] Three very different men brought together by one Gospel. And as I usually like to do, I'm going to break the passage into parts. This time into four points.

So here we go. Firstly, grace changes the atmosphere, verses 1 through 7. Paul begins, Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus, and Timothy, our brother, to Philemon, our beloved fellow worker. Now immediately, there is something unusual here. Paul normally begins his letter by calling himself an apostle. He had authority from Christ.

But here, he doesn't say, Paul an apostle. He says, Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus. I wonder why. And I think it's because this is going to be a very personal letter. Paul is going to ask Philemon to do something difficult. And he doesn't want to begin by pulling rank.

[3:31] In fact, he says that explicitly in verses 8 and 9. He says, Though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do what is right, yet for love's sake I prefer to appeal to you.

Paul could have said, Philemon, I am an apostle. Do as you're told. Instead, he says, In effect, I could order you, but I'd rather appeal to you as your brother in Christ.

That's worth noticing. Christian leadership is not about getting your own way because you have a title. Paul had a genuine God-given authority, but he was very careful about how he used it.

There is a lesson here for elders, church leaders, husbands, parents, and really for every one of us. Having the right to insist on something doesn't always mean that insisting is the wisest or most loving thing to do.

Paul then addresses Philemon. We don't actually know a great deal about Philemon, but the letter does suggest that he was probably reasonably well off because the church met in his house.

[4:49] Houses large enough to accommodate a Christian gathering were not something everybody possessed. Paul also mentions Ophia and Archippus.

Ophia may well have been Philemon's wife, although the Bible doesn't actually tell us that. So we shouldn't turn a reasonable possibility into fact.

Archippus may have been a member of the household and seems to have had some ministry within the church. He is also mentioned in Colossians 4. And that gives us another clue.

Philemon was almost certainly connected with the church at Colossae. So, picture the scene. There is a church meeting in Philemon's home. Philemon is a Christian.

He is known for his love and faith. Paul says in verse 7, What a wonderful thing to have said about you.

[5:55] Wouldn't you like that as your Christian reputation? Not, he knows absolutely everything. Or, you don't want to get into theological arguments with him.

Not even, she's been attending this church for 50 years. But, people are refreshed by being around them. Are people being refreshed by being around us a challenge?

Philemon's Christianity wasn't merely theological knowledge. It affected other people. And notice how Paul begins the letter in verse 3. Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

We can skim over introductions like that because Paul uses similar words so often. But here, they matter. Grace. The whole letter is going to be about grace.

Philemon has received grace. Anisimus has received grace. And now, Paul is going to ask Philemon to show grace. That is always the order of the Gospel.

[7:04] God never says, Show enough grace to other people, and perhaps I'll show some to you. No. God gives grace to us in Christ, and then that grace begins to overflow into our relationships.

Ephesians 4.32 says, Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another as God in Christ forgave you. Notice the order.

We forgive because we have been forgiven. Christian forgiveness begins by looking upwards, before it looks sideways. Secondly, grace changes people.

Verses 8 through 16. Paul writes in verse 10, I appeal to you for my child, Anisimus, whose father I became in my imprisonment.

So now we meet Anisimus, and this is where the story gets interesting. Anisimus was a slave belonging to Philemon, and it appears that he had left Philemon and somehow ended up with Paul.

[8:14] Traditionally, we call Anisimus a runaway slave, and that is probably what happened. People also often assume he stole money from Philemon before running away.

That is possible because Paul later in the chapter says, if he has wronged you at all, or owes you anything. But Paul, notice, says if.

The Bible doesn't actually tell us Anisimus emptied the family silver drawer before disappearing. So this is a useful reminder that sometimes we know Bible stories so well that we accidentally add things to them.

So let's distinguish between what the Bible says and what we have assumed. What we do know is that something had gone seriously wrong between Anisimus and Philemon.

Anisimus had become separated from his master. It could be for many different reasons. Whatever it was, Anisimus somehow came into contact with Paul while Paul was a prisoner.

[9:23] And then something wonderful happened. Anisimus became a Christian. He was saved and became a member of God's family. Paul says, whose father I became in my imprisonment.

Paul obviously didn't mean his biological father. What he meant was that through Paul's ministry, Anisimus had come to faith in Christ and had become his spiritual son.

And I love the irony of this story. Anisimus was trying to get away from Philemon and ran into Paul. We don't know how it happened. Perhaps Anisimus knew of Paul's connection with Philemon and deliberately sought him out.

Perhaps their meeting seemed entirely accidental. The Bible doesn't tell us. But, from God's perspective, it certainly wasn't accidental.

Anisimus had run from one Christian and ended up meeting another. Another Christian who introduced him to Christ. You can run a long way from people, but you cannot run beyond the reach of God.

[10 : 35] Psalm 139 says, Where shall I go from your spirit? Or where shall I flee from your presence? Jonah discovered that. He bought a ticket in the opposite direction from where God had told him to go.

That didn't work terribly well, did it? His sitting room was a smelly and uncomfortable place. It was where he spent time, in a large fish's belly.

Anisimus discovered that God knew exactly where he was, too. Perhaps somebody here has family members who seem a very long way from God.

You prayed for them. You've spoken to them. And perhaps you've watched them make choices that concern you. Don't give up praying for them. You don't know whom God might put in their path or what conversation he might use.

You don't know what circumstances he might allow. God found Anisimus, and when God found him, he changed him. Look at verse 11.

[11 : 42] Paul says, Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful to you and to me. There's a little joke hidden in that verse which we miss in English.

The name Anisimus means something like useful, beneficial or profitable. In fact, he was actually quite a common slave name. So Paul is making a play on his name.

He's effectively saying, Mr. Useful hasn't been terribly useful to you, but now he really is useful. You can imagine Philemon reading that and thinking, Thanks, Paul.

Very clever. But underneath the wordplay is something profound. Anisimus has changed. He hasn't simply turned over a new leaf. He has become a new man because he belongs to Christ.

2 Corinthians 5.17 says, If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away. Behold, the new has come.

[12 : 52] That doesn't mean Christians instantly become perfect. If you became a Christian last Tuesday, I'm sure you didn't wake up on Wednesday knowing the whole Bible, or never losing your temper, or remembering to put the rubbish out before your wife had to remind you.

Sanctification takes time. But conversion does mean that something fundamental has changed. We belong to Christ. We have a new Lord, a new identity, a new direction.

And eventually, that new life begins to show. And that is what Paul sees in Anisimus. In verse 12, he says, I am sending him back to you, send him my very heart.

That's unique language. This man really matters deeply to Paul. Imagine Philemon reading this. The man who had perhaps caused him considerable trouble is coming home.

But Paul says, he isn't just your troublesome slave anymore. He's part of my heart. Then verse 13, Paul says, 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 : 13] Anisimus had become useful to Paul. But Paul would not keep him because there is unfinished business back home. That is another important lesson about becoming a Christian.

Coming to Christ does not mean that all our previous responsibilities disappear. Sometimes the gospel requires us to go back and put things right. Perhaps there is an apology that needs making. Perhaps something needs returning. Perhaps a debt needs dealing with. Perhaps we have damaged a relationship and, as far as it depends upon us, we need to seek reconciliation.

Zacchaeus is a very good example. When Jesus transformed his life in Luke 19, Zacchaeus didn't say, Wonderful, I'm forgiven, but we'll forget about all those people I cheated.

His changed heart affected his wallet. He said, If I have defrauded anyone of anything, I restore it fourfold. Grace is free, but grace isn't cheap.

[15 : 23] It changes us. Paul therefore sends Onesimus back. But look at what he says in verse 15 and 16. For this perhaps is why he was parted from you for a while, that you might have him back forever, no longer as a bondservant, but more than a bondservant, but as a beloved brother.

Notice Paul's careful wording. Perhaps. Paul believes in the sovereignty of God. He can see God's hand at work, but he doesn't pretend to know every detail of God's secret purposes.

And that's why he uses the word perhaps. And that's quite a good lesson for us. Christians can sometimes be very quick to explain exactly why God allowed something.

Sometimes, looking back, we may see something of God's purpose, but we should be careful about claiming to know what God hasn't told us.

Paul says, Perhaps. But this much is certain. The relationship has changed. Onesimus is returning, no longer as a bondservant, but more than a bondservant, as a beloved brother.

[16:40] Now, I need to say something about slavery here. Slavery in the Roman world was established part of society, and it could take different forms.

It wasn't identical in every respect to the race-based Atlantic slavery that we tend immediately to think of today. But neither should we make Roman slavery sound harmless.

A slave was under another person's authority and did not possess the freedom we take for granted. Paul doesn't launch a political campaign against the Roman institution of slavery in this little personal letter, but he does something quieter and ultimately revolutionary.

He tells a Christian master to look at his slave and see not a runaway slave, but a brother in Christ. That same principle appears in Colossians 3.11.

Here there is no Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free, but Christ is all and in all.

[17:53] And in Galatians 3.28, there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

The Gospel changes how we value people. The world gives people labels like successful or failure, rich or poor, educated or uneducated, old or young, useful or troubled.

Sometimes we continue to see people according to the label they had when we first met them. Paul says to Philemon, you need to look again because Jesus has changed this man.

And here is something else fascinating. Look at Colossians 4.9. Paul mentions Onesimus, our faithful and beloved brother, who is one of you.

Think about that description. Not Onesimus, the runaway, nor Onesimus, you know, Philemon's slave. Not even Onesimus, the one who made that terrible mistake.

[19:12] But, our faithful and beloved brother. That's how grace sees him now. And perhaps some of us need to learn that. When God has forgiven somebody, we should be very careful about continually defining them by something God has forgiven.

Sometimes Christians have remarkably long memories for other people's sins. We would be horrified if God dealt with us that way. Psalm 103 says, As far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us.

That doesn't mean sin has no consequences. It definitely does. Neither does it mean that trust is instantly restored after serious wrongdoing. It doesn't mean that wisdom disappears.

But it does mean that the gospel gives people a new identity. Onesimus is no longer simply the man who ran away. He is a beloved brother.

Thirdly, grace pays the bill. Verses 17 through 21. Now we reach what I think is the heart of this little letter. Verse 17.

[20:27] So, if you consider me your partner, receive him as you would receive me. Just think about that for a moment. Paul doesn't merely say, let him come home.

He says, receive him as you would receive me. Imagine the knock on the door. Philemon opens it and there stands Onesimus.

What happens now? Paul says, When you see him standing there, welcome him as though I were standing there. Then comes verse 18.

If, if he has wronged you at all or owes you anything, charge that to my account. That surely is the gospel picture for us.

Again, we shouldn't say Paul is Christ in some exact allegory, but surely we can hear an echo of the gospel. Onesimus had a debt he could not easily settle.

[21:27] Paul says, put it on my account. Isn't that what Jesus has done for us? We stood before God with a debt we could never pay. Not a financial debt, a moral debt, which is sin.

Romans 3 says, all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. We cannot undo yesterday's sin by behaving better tomorrow. You cannot pay off guilt by accumulating good deeds.

But Jesus took our guilt upon himself. Isaiah 53 says, the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all. And 1 Peter 2:24 says, he himself bore our sins in his body on the tree.

Paul says to Philemon, charge it to me. At the cross, Christ took what stood against us. He paid the debt. And then look again at verse 17.

Receive him as you would receive me. That also gives us a glimpse of our position in Christ. God doesn't merely tolerate the Christian.

[22:38] He receives us because we are his children. Ephesians 1 speaks of the blessings that arouse in Christ. Romans 8 begins, There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in

Christ Jesus.

That is astonishing grace. Our debt placed upon Christ. His righteousness credited to us. 2 Corinthians 5:21 says, For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

We come empty handed. Christ pays. He reconciles and he receives. Which brings us back to Philemon.

Because if Philemon has received grace like that, what is he going to do with Onesimus? This is the uncomfortable part of grace. We love grace when we are receiving it.

We are sometimes rather less enthusiastic when God asks us to give it. We sing Amazing Grace how sweet the sound and it is until Amazing Grace asks me to forgive.

[24:00] Then suddenly we discover we'd quite like some justice for them obviously. In other words, mercy for me, justice for them.

Jesus told a disturbing parable about that in Matthew 18. A servant owed his king an enormous debt that he could never repay. The king forgave him.

Then that same servant went out, found a fellow servant who owed him a much smaller amount, grabbed him and demanded payment. The point is not that the second debt was imaginary, it was real.

But the second point is that the forgiven man had forgotten the magnitude of the forgiveness he himself had received. That is why the gospel is the foundation of Christian forgiveness.

We don't forgive because the wrong didn't matter. I mean, if it didn't matter, it wouldn't need forgiving. We forgive because we ourselves live every day by mercy and grace.

[25:08] forgiveness Now, forgiveness and reconciliation need wisdom. The Bible never requires us to pretend evil is safe. If somebody is abusive or dangerous, forgiveness does not mean placing yourself back in danger.

Trust may take time to rebuild. Consequences may remain. But Christians cannot cherish bitterness as though it were a treasured possession.

Colossians 3:13 says, As the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. That can be incredibly difficult.

For some people, it may be a long process. But we begin at the cross. How much have I been forgiven? Everything. What did my forgiveness cost?

Everything. Christ gave himself. Then Paul does something slightly amusing in verse 19. He says, I, Paul, write this with my own hand.

[26:20] I will repay it to say nothing of your owing me, even your own self. You have to smile. I'll pay whatever Onesimus owes you.

Philemon. Of course, I wouldn't dream of mentioning the fact that you owe me your very life. Here, I believe that Paul is referring to Philemon's spiritual life, not physical.

Paul had probably been used in his preaching and teaching to guide Philemon to salvation. So Paul says, we won't mention that. Paul is applying some fairly sanctified pressure, but he isn't finished.

Verse 21, confident of your obedience, I write to you knowing that you will do even more than I say. No pressure, Philemon.

I'll know you'll do the right thing. In fact, I'm confident you'll do more than I've asked. And then verse 22, do. At the same time, prepare a guest room for me.

[27:26] In other words, and by the way, I'm hoping to visit. You can almost imagine Philemon thinking, what? So you're going to check on me?

There is warmth and humour in this letter, but there is also accountability. Paul expects the gospel to produce action, not merely good intentions.

Not merely, I'll pray about forgiving Onesimus. Philemon must open the door, he must receive the man, and Paul expects him to go beyond the minimum.

And that raises a question for us. What does grace look like when it becomes practical? Perhaps it is making a phone call. Maybe it is apologising first.

Perhaps it is refusing to repeat the story that makes somebody else look bad. maybe it is giving somebody another opportunity, or accepting that the Christian you remember from 20 years ago isn't necessarily the Christian standing before you today.

[28:32] Perhaps it is welcoming somebody into the church who isn't remotely like you, or it could be treating somebody as a brother or sister, rather than according to their education, accent, job,

age, background or past.

The gospel must eventually reach our relationships, otherwise we have not understood, and it's theory only.

Fourthly, grace changes the community, verses 22 through 25. Paul closes the letter by mentioning several people, Epaphras, Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke.

And there is something interesting even in those names. Mark had his own history. Acts 15 tells us that Paul and Barnabas had such a sharp disagreement about Mark that they separated.

Mark had previously left them during missionary work, and Paul didn't want to take him again. Yet, years later, in 2 Timothy 4.11, we read, Paul says, get Mark and bring him with you, for he is very useful to me for ministry.

[29:54] Isn't that interesting? In a letter about Onesimus, people can change, relationships can be restored, past failure does not have to be the final chapter.

And then there is Demas. Here, he is described as Paul's fellow worker. But sadly, in 2 Timothy 4, Paul later writes, Demas is in love with this present world, has deserted me.

That is sobering. One man who failed became useful again. Another man who was useful later walked away. So don't write somebody off because of yesterday.

And don't become complacent because you're standing strongly today. We need Christ every day.

And then Paul finishes with the words, The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.

And so we're back to where we began. But just for one minute, I want us to go back and imagine that moment when Onesimus arrived back at Philemon's house.

[31:03] Onesimus may have travelled something like a thousand miles to get back to Colossae. That's a long journey when you're not entirely sure what is waiting for you at the other end.

I wonder how many times on that journey Onesimus rehearsed what he was going to say. And then finally, he is standing outside Philemon's house.

perhaps he takes a deep breath and he knocks on the door and then imagine Philemon opening the door.

There stands Onesimus, the man who had left him, the man who had wronged him. It was possibly the last person Philemon expected or particularly wanted to find standing on his doorstep.

And Onesimus is holding a letter and it's from Paul. That must have been quite a moment. Think of the emotions on both sides. Onesimus has travelled all that way not knowing whether he will be forgiven, welcomed or simply punished.

[32:12] Philemon meanwhile suddenly finds the past standing on his doorstep in flesh and blood. And he opens Paul's letter and as we've seen Paul doesn't merely say go easy on him.

he says in effect Philemon this man standing in front of you is your brother now and if you regard me as your partner welcome him as you would welcome me.

Suddenly Christianity has become very practical. Forgiveness is easy to preach when the person who hurt you is a thousand miles away. It becomes rather more challenging when he is standing on your doorstep.

And perhaps that is one of the great lessons of Philemon. The gospel doesn't simply reconcile us to God it changes the way we receive one another. Grace is not just something we believe.

Sometimes grace opens the door. Grace grace at the beginning grace at the end and grace all the way through.

[33:21] So let's return to the truth we began with. Because the gospel changes us it must also change the way we see and treat other people.

Has Philemon proved that? Look at Paul. Once a persecutor of Christians now he is willing to bear another man's debt. Grace changed Paul.

Look at Onesimus once useless to Philemon now useful faithful and beloved. Grace changed Onesimus. And now look at Philemon Paul is saying the same grace that changed us must change what happens when you open that door.

Grace must change Philemon too and grace must change us. So where does that leave us? I want to finish with three very simple questions.

First am I an Onesimus? Perhaps you know there is something you need to put right. Something you've avoided. Somebody you've hurt.

[34:31] Something you owe. An apology you need to make. Becoming a Christian doesn't mean hiding from our past. Because we are secure in Christ we can face it.

maybe it's time to go back and deal with whatever it was. Second am I a Philemon? Is there somebody I still see according to their past?

Somebody whose name immediately brings back what they did. Perhaps God has been at work in them while you've been holding onto an old picture of them. Can you see a brother?

Can you see a sister? Can you make room for grace? And thirdly do I understand what Christ has done for me? Because ultimately that is where this little book points us to.

Before we ask who is my Onesimus we need to remember that spiritually we were all an Onesimus. We were the ones estranged.

[35 : 34] We were the ones with debt. We were the ones unable to make ourselves right with God. But Jesus Christ stepped in. Our sin? Charge it to him.

Our debt? He paid it. Our separation from God? He reconciled us. And now in Christ we are received.

Romans 5.8 says God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us. Not after we had sorted ourselves out.

Not once we become respectable. Not after we paid off enough of the debt. But while we were sinners Christ died for us.

This is grace. And once you have really understood grace like that you cannot keep it locked safely inside a theological box. Eventually grace walks into the kitchen, into the marriage, the family, the church meeting, into the disagreement, the old hurt, or into the relationship we thought could never change.

[36 : 43] That little letter to Philemon asks a very big question. If Jesus Christ has changed the way God receives me, shouldn't that change the way I receive others?

The gospel is not simply something we believe. It is something that transforms us. It changed Paul and Onesimus. It was written to challenge Philemon.

And brothers and sisters, by God's grace, it should be changing us. Let's pray. Dear Heavenly Father, help us to show that same love in our own relationships.

Give us grace to forgive when we have been hurt, humility to put things right when we have caused hurt, and the courage to welcome others as brothers and sisters in Christ.

Thank you that through Jesus, you have forgiven us and brought us into your family. Help us this week to live out the words we have heard, not simply knowing about your love, but showing it to others.

[37 : 49] And it's in Jesus' name we pray. Amen.