

“PHILEMON AND ONESIMUS: BROTHERS IN CHRIST”

PHILEMON 1-25

Personal Introduction

Good morning everyone. I'm Jeff - one of the pastors here at HMCC of Jakarta. And it's my privilege to preach the Word of God for us today!

Sermon Introduction

We'll be taking a quick pause on our sermon series through the Gospel of Matthew. Today, we'll be taking a look at Philemon.

The title of today's sermon is “Philemon and Onesimus: Brothers in Christ.”

Introduction

Now, one of the first things we learned as a kid is that we're not alone in this world, and we have other people in our lives..

And then as we get older, we learn that much of life is actually about relationships.

You have...

- Relationships with your parents and siblings...
- And then with your friends, classmates, and teachers...
- And then with your co-workers, bosses, and subordinates...
- And maybe with your spouse and children...
- And I can go on and on...

We all may have different kinds of relationships, but we all have them.

And over time, what we learn is that relationships are not easy.

And even the best relationships can become complicated.

- Misunderstandings can happen. Expectations can be unmet.
- People can disappoint us, and sometimes we disappoint them.

<pause>

And then when it comes to the church, we kind of expect things to be different, right?

Because isn't the church where love is preached? Where we're supposed to care for one another as fellow brothers and sisters in Christ? (So relationships here should be simpler, cleaner, and less painful, right?)

But the more time we spend together and the more we open up and have deeper relationships with one another, the more we see that conflicts can still happen. And brothers and sisters in Christ can still disappoint one another, and even hurt each other.

And so relationships in the church (including ours) can get messy.

But praise the Lord that His Word for us today speaks into this messiness.

The One Thing

When brothers & sisters hurt each other greatly, we have the opportunity to love each other deeply.

Scripture Introduction

So please turn your Bibles to Philemon 1-25 (we'll be taking a look at the entire letter - It's short but very meaningful).

For context - Apostle Paul is the main author of this letter (though he's in prison at this time).

And the letter is primarily about two people: Philemon and Onesimus.

- Philemon is a faithful brother in Christ (he loves Jesus, he loves his fellow Christians, and he even hosts a local church gathering in his house).
- And Onesimus is Philemon's bondservant (or slave) - so legally, he was Philemon's property under Roman law.

And here's where the messiness comes in:

- We don't know exactly what happened, but based on the content of Paul's letter, we can put the pieces together...
- It seems like Onesimus ran away from his master Philemon (and possibly even stole money or property from him).
- But then some time afterwards, Onesimus met Paul and he came to repent of his sins and put his faith in Christ.

So the question is: Now what? How is a Christian master and his Christian slave (who ran away from him and wronged him) - How are they supposed to relate with one another?

Paul writes this letter to give guidance to Philemon.

Let me read it for us...

Philemon (ESV)

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

To Philemon our beloved fellow worker **2** and Apphia our sister and Archippus our fellow soldier, and the church in your house:

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

4 I thank my God always when I remember you in my prayers, **5** because I hear of your love and of the faith that you have toward the Lord Jesus and for all the saints, **6** 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. **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.

8 Accordingly, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do what is required, **9** yet for love's sake I prefer to appeal to you—I, Paul, an old man and now a prisoner also for Christ Jesus— **10** I appeal to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I became in my imprisonment. **11** (Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful to you and to me.) **12** I am sending him back to you, sending my very heart. **13** I would have been glad to keep him with me, in order that he might serve me on your behalf during my imprisonment for the gospel, **14** but I preferred to do nothing without your consent in order that your goodness might not be by compulsion but of your own accord. **15** For this perhaps is why he was parted from you for a while, that you might have him back forever, **16** no longer as a bondservant but more than a bondservant, as a beloved brother—especially to me, but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord.

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

21 Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say. **22** At the same time, prepare a guest room for me, for I am hoping that through your prayers I will be graciously given to you.

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

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

This is God's Word.

Overview

- I. Loving the whole church (1-7)
- II. Loving a specific brother (8-25)

I. Loving the whole church (1-7)

Paul begins his letter in the same way as he usually does - With an introduction and thanksgiving.

- We can see the introduction in verses 1-3.
- And then the thanksgiving in verses 4-7.

First, let's look down at verses 1-3 - We see that Paul is not only addressing Philemon, but also Apphia and Archippus (who may be Philemon's wife and child).

And then interestingly, he also addresses the church that meets in his house.

Now this is important...

- Because we normally think that a personal letter is only for one person.
- But this tells us that even though the letter is primarily for Philemon, it's not meant to just be a private letter that's to be hidden under the bed afterwards, but is to be shared with the entire church as well.
- So when Paul was writing this letter, he also had the local church in mind...

And so notice how the church is also part of Paul's thanksgiving - look at verses 4-5...

- He's not just thanking God for Philemon's personal & private love and devotion towards Christ, but he thanks God for how Philemon's been able to express that love publicly towards all the saints.
 - That phrase - "all the saints" - it might sound general to us. But for Philemon, it was deeply personal.
 - These were the faces that he saw week after week - these are the brothers and sisters who gather in his home and whose joys & struggles he knew.
 - And so Paul is thanking God that Philemon's Christian life was not lived in isolation but in a church community.

And so look at verse 6 - Paul's prayer for Philemon also involves the church.

- "I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective..."

- The word "sharing" there - in the original language - It means "fellowship" or "relationship." So it reads more like: "I pray that the [fellowship] of your faith may become effective."
- So Paul's prayer is that Philemon would continue to be effective (or active) in fellowship with other Christians.
- Why?
 - Look at the second half of verse 6 - So that he would gain a fuller understanding of every good thing that we have for the sake of Christ.
 - What are the good things that we have in Christ? A lot of things like love, grace, mercy, unity...
 - How can we have a fuller understanding of those things?
 - It's through living life-on-life with other believers.

Because we don't just learn love from reading books, we learn love by loving real people.

A Christian who is not part of a church may learn truths about God and His people intellectually, but they're going to miss out on something vital. Because love grows when it's tested - when we forgive, serve, care, and reconcile with one another.

And so Paul assumes that Christian growth happens in community.

So if you profess faith in Christ, but not yet a member of a church, please consider being a member of a church (either our church or another Gospel-proclaiming church) where you can practice and grow in your love for all the saints. Please feel free to talk to me (or anyone around you) after the service.

And for brothers and sisters who are already members of our church - I'd want you to be prepared... There may be times in the future when we start questioning if it'd just be easier to no longer be part of a church... Because won't it be easier and more convenient to just worship on my own? Won't it be easier when we don't have to deal with relationships in church?

- In a sense... "Yes, it would be easier."
- But that doesn't mean that it'd be helpful for you in your spiritual growth.
 - I think we all want to grow in our love for Christ and for his people (this is something that we regularly pray for as a church).
 - But just like a fish matures in water, a Christian matures in a church.

God designed the church as the place where His people can express and grow in their love for one another.

And so look at verse 7 - Paul is so encouraged that Philemon has been expressing this kind of tangible love for his whole church (like how he opened his entire house for them) & so Paul encourages Philemon on how "the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you."

I think that makes me ask myself: Would other church members think of me that way?

That's something that we can ask ourselves: "Would my brothers and sisters consider me as someone who is refreshing for their hearts?"

As I'm thinking of all the other ways that Philemon might've refreshed his spiritual siblings, I can't help but to think of all the ways that I'm so thankful for the love that has been shown between our members here (that's also been so refreshing to me).

- I've heard of members heading to other members' houses in short notice to comfort and encourage them.
- I've heard of members opening their homes to one another, sharing meals together.
- I've heard of members starting their own small groups to study God's Word together.
- I've heard of members organizing their own praise and worship sessions to sing together.
 - These are the kinds of things that are so refreshing to hear about because they're signs of spiritual life and growth.

Even after Sunday Celebration, if you see new members or visitors who are sitting by themselves or are not talking to anyone else, you can show brotherly love to them by talking to them and getting to know them and helping them to get integrated into our church..

Brothers and sisters, let's continue to love our whole church tangibly, refreshing one another's hearts.

So first, "Loving the whole church." And second...

II. Loving a specific brother (8-25)

Paul is going to get more specific here...

And I think this will be so helpful for us.

- Because most of us would say that we love the whole church...
 - And I believe we truly do.
- But that love is going to be tested when it comes down to a name... A face... A specific member...
- Then will we extend that same love even to that specific brother or sister who has hurt us?

Paul now gets into the matter at hand - the complicated relationship between Philemon and Onesimus.

- To help us follow along, we can think of this second part as unfolding in 3 movements (And note that each movement is going tell us something about what Paul desires for Philemon and Onesimus).

For the first movement, let's look down at verses 8-14...

- Verses 8-9 - Paul clarifies that even though he's bold enough to command Philemon to do what's required, he doesn't want to do that. Instead, he prefers to appeal to him.
- Then in verse 14 - He repeats the same idea - He doesn't want Philemon to do anything out of obligation, but out of his own accord.

Why is Paul trying to make this explicitly clear?

- He says it in verse 9 - For the sake of love.
- Paul knows that he could've just forced Philemon to receive Onesimus back (and maybe Philemon could've just pretended like everything is ok when he sees Onesimus. But if he was being forced, then deep in his heart, he hasn't forgiven him yet (there's still bitterness towards Onesimus) - but can that really be called love?)
 - And would it really be loving for Paul if all that he cared about was the end result - as long as everything looks ok on the outside...
 - No, Paul wouldn't be ok with that; that's not the kind of culture of love that God's family is supposed to have (as if we can just hide the messy bits under the rug).

Paul understands something crucial: love cannot be forced. Obedience that comes from pressure may look right on the outside, but it does not produce Christ-like hearts & genuine love for one another.

Paul doesn't want mere compliance. He wants to see real spiritual fruit.

So instead of asserting authority, Paul presents himself humbly: "I, Paul, an old man and now a prisoner also for Christ Jesus." He is not playing the power card as an Apostle (which he could have). He is appealing as a brother.

Why? Because he knows that God looks deeper at the heart, not just what's on the outside.

And ultimately, Paul wants to please God - He is a prisoner for Christ Jesus, imprisoned for the sake of the Gospel.

- And for the sake of love - and to please his Lord Jesus - Paul lays down his authority, so that Philemon can have the opportunity to grow as a Christian, as he personally chooses to please his Lord Jesus and love his brother genuinely.

This is something that we can keep in mind as well.

In the messiness of relationships in our church, sometimes we're not the one in conflict but - kind of like Paul here - we know a couple of brothers and sisters who are in conflict. In that case, our role is not to be on this person's team or that person's team, but we're Team Jesus. We're not trying to fire up one side or hate on the other, and we're not just trying to get to the end results as fast as possible, but we want to see reconciliation & spiritual growth for the sake of our brothers and sisters who are involved.

- This may take more patience, energy, and effort, especially as we walk alongside them for an extended time. But what we want is to help them see for themselves what it would look like to please Jesus out of their own free will.

And the question on your mind now may be: "How can we do that?"

Let's see what Paul does here in the second movement - let's look down at verses 15-17...

Like a good brother, Paul points Philemon to God's sovereignty and good purpose...

Verses 15-16 - "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, as a beloved brother..."

Paul doesn't minimize the pain. He doesn't say, "This wasn't that bad." Instead, he lifts Philemon's eyes to eternity.

- What if God was at work even in the loss?
- What if this painful separation led to eternal brotherhood in Heaven?

Because somehow, God used Onesimus' time away to lead him to Paul, which then led him to repent of his sins and put his faith in Christ. So what that means is that he's now united in Christ's death and resurrection just as all believers are.

In the eyes of the world, Onesimus may still be a slave. But in Christ, he is now family.

- The world may still label their relationship as master and slave, owner and property, victim and offender.
 - But what God sees is Philemon and Onesimus: brothers in Christ, equal in spiritual status - both children of the living God.

So Paul is not asking Philemon to forgive Onesimus because he deserves it, but because Christ has redefined who both of them are.

- This would've been completely insane and unheard of during this time.
 - At the time, as much as one-third of the Roman Empire consisted of slaves. So they really don't want that large number of slaves to get any idea of running away or worse, rebelling.
 - So for those who try to run away, it is expected that they would be harshly beaten (and maybe even crucified and killed). For some, their foreheads would be branded with the letter "F" in Latin which stands for "Fugitive." It would be a mark of shame for the runaway slave for the rest of his life.
- If Onesimus' master was not a Christian, that's what he can expect.

- To have a slave master receive their runaway slave without beating them would be unheard of. To have them be treated as equal in status and part of the family would be absolutely crazy (it would've flipped the Roman Empire upside down).

Is that really what Paul wants Philemon to do?

Look at verse 17 - Paul makes his appeal unmistakably clear.

“So if you consider me your partner, receive him as you would receive me.”

Just think about what Paul is asking here...

- Philemon is to take his love and affection for Paul and he's to transfer it to Onesimus - the very man who wronged him.
 - If we look back at verse 12 - Paul is basically telling Philemon to receive Onesimus as if he's receiving Paul's very own heart.

This is not just politely tolerating each other - That'd be like agreeing to have Onesimus back but then ignoring him and not talking to him ever again... No, what Paul is describing is full reception.

Paul is saying, “Treat Onesimus the way you would treat me - as your fellow worker, friend, and beloved brother.”

Now, imagine having to do that for someone who's stolen from you! That's not easy!

- It's easier to just forgive from a distance (and forget about him).
- But the gospel doesn't just remove guilt from far away; it restores relationships.

<pause>

So then what does that mean for us today? In Christ, there's hope of reconciliation - We trust that the God who made us a family will sustain us as a family, and that the Holy Spirit is sanctifying our hearts, shaping us to be more like Christ.

Let's ask ourselves: “Who's our Onesimus?”

- Is there a brother or sister who God is placing in our hearts whom we need to forgive and receive as a fellow brother or sister in Christ?

Or perhaps we thought that we've already forgiven that person... But maybe this letter is challenging us to reassess what true forgiveness looks like. Forgiveness is not merely tolerating a fellow church member without speaking to them or without further interacting with them. But it looks like receiving them as if you're receiving a dear friend.

- The world may teach you that it'd be easier to just forget about that person and move on; that they're making your life harder anyways.

- But God's Word today challenges us to do something different.

And then a similar question: "Who is your Philemon?"

- Is there someone whom you've wronged that you need to seek forgiveness from?
- If there is, then this text also challenges us to humble ourselves to ask that person for forgiveness.
- And when you do, don't feel entitled as if you deserve their forgiveness. You technically don't. But in Christ, there is hope of reconciliation.
- Give that other brother/sister time to reflect and respond to you.

<pause>

Let's take a look at our final movement in verses 18-28...

Paul says something bold to Philemon - Verse 18 - "If he has wronged you at all, or owes you anything, charge that to my account."

Verse 19 - Paul personally guarantees this. So up to this point in the letter, Timothy (or another brother) might be writing down this letter as Paul is speaking. But now, Paul himself is personally writing this in his handwriting, "I, Paul, write this with my own hand: I will repay it."

And Paul then makes a note that Philemon himself technically owes a debt to Paul because the eternal life he has was due to Paul's ministry.

This would've pointed Philemon to the eternal debt he himself owed.

It's a debt that we all owed as sinners.

- And the truth is that it's a debt that we could never pay back - Because how can you pay back countless sins and wrong doings against a holy God? No amount of money or good works would be enough to cover that debt.

As Philemon is being reminded of this, I imagine that he's reminded of his Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

- Jesus was the one who looked at our sins and said, "Charge that to my account... I will repay it."
- And Christ died on the cross for the sins of his people (paying our debt with his blood), so that instead of eternity in Hell, those who believe in him will have eternal life in Heaven with God our Heavenly Father, alongside all of our brothers and sisters in Christ.
 - So for Onesimus, this should've reminded him that Jesus has already paid an infinitely greater debt than the one Onesimus could've owed him.

How would this not soften Philemon's heart?

Brothers and sisters, does the Gospel still soften your hearts?

- Doesn't the Gospel remind us that the church member who've wronged us is the one whom Christ already died for?
 - Does that convict us to forgive as Christ has forgiven...
- I know that our church wants to love Christ and his people, and we genuinely do want to forgive one another.
- And I know that forgiving someone who's wronged us is not easy.

And when we need to forgive someone, we tend to try to reason on why this person should be forgiven...

- And the more that we try to come up with these reasons, the more we realize that this person is not deserving of forgiveness.
- We may even think that to forgive this person would just be unfair.

And I'd agree - In a sense, forgiveness is unfair.

- What that person deserves is some sort of punishment (definitely not your love and patience).
- But what you're choosing to do is to show mercy (not punishing them).
- And what you're extending to them instead is love (receiving them as a dear friend).
- That's definitely not fair.

But how close does that sound to the Gospel?

The beautiful thing is that each time we choose to forgive and show grace and mercy to a brother or sister, we're displaying the Gospel of Jesus to one another.

- A picture of a relationship broken. But then healed and reconciled through the power of the Gospel and the Holy Spirit in our hearts.

But then part of displaying the Gospel also means that someone has to take up the cost (just as Jesus took up the cost of our sins on the cross).

- It requires us to die to self - Because our flesh may not be getting what it desires (our heart may desire revenge).
- But may we rejoice in doing what is unfair to us, but is loving to the other person.

So when a brother or sister hurts us greatly, what an opportunity to love them deeply & to proclaim the Gospel boldly.

Look at verse 21 - Paul is confident that Philemon would do even more than what he says.

- We're not told exactly what happened afterwards.

But if we look at verse 22 - Paul is hoping to visit Philemon and stay at his house.

Imagine with me... How amazing would it be for Paul to arrive at his house, and when the door opens for him, he is greeted by Philemon and Onesimus who's welcoming him together - side by side - with smiles on their faces.

I'm also imagining how it'd be for our church to be together in Heaven standing side by side with Paul, Philemon, and Onesimus and worshiping God together. In Heaven, we will not relate with one another as master and slave, victim and offender, but truly as brothers and sisters in the family of God.

Conclusion

As we conclude, let's look back to verse 6.

Paul prayed that through Philemon's fellowship in the church, he would have a deeper and fuller understanding of every good thing we have for the sake of Christ.

And I pray for the same thing for our church. The more we invest in friendships with one another, even if it may mean that we'll be more likely to hurt one another. But may that provide us with opportunities for reconciliation, which will then help us to have a fuller understanding of the love, grace, and mercy that we have in Christ.

And so as we aim to love the whole church and specific brothers and sisters, let's fix our eyes on Christ who gave up his life to sacrificially love his whole church, and to specifically love you & forgive you of your sins.

Let's pray...