

The Gospel Made Personal Paul's Letter to Philemon

Creekside Community Church, San Leandro, California
Greg V. Arthur, July 15, 2018

Philem 8-9 - ⁸Therefore, though I have enough confidence in Christ to order you to do what is proper ⁹yet for love's sake I rather appeal to you ...

Forgotten Letters

Good morning Creekside, I'm Greg Arthur, one of the pastors here. If you're new to the terminology, the title pastor comes from a Latin word, ... pastor, which means sheep herder. So, if I'm a pastor here, then you are ... ? Hey, Biblically, it's no insult to be called sheep. Jesus Himself call us that. Anyway, you whom Jesus calls sheep, would you pray with me?

Today, we're going to look at the little New Testament book of Philemon. It's one of the four littlest books of the Bible that were going through in the next six weeks in a series we've entitled "The Forgotten Letters." These books are often overlooked. They are so little that they take up less than one page each, which makes you ask whether a one-page book can be a book. Yet, isn't true, that sometimes the littlest things carry the most weight? Lincoln's Gettysburg Address was written on two sheets of stationery and took him two minutes to deliver, -- *Fourscore and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent a new nation, conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.*" The speaker before him, Everett Something, spoke for more than two hours and nothing he said is remembered at all. Sometimes the littlest things carry the most weight. So, it is with these little books of the Bible.

The Gospel Made Personal

The little book of Philemon is a personal letter from Paul, hand-delivered by couriers to a man named, Philemon, concerning another man, Onesimus, -- three very different people, from very different stations in life, who are now united as brothers in Christ. And you might ask why is their old personal letter in the Bible? What does God want to say to us through a personal letter? And I guess to answer that question is to ask another that is at the heart of many people's misgivings about God: Does God care for me personally? Did Jesus die on the cross for me personally or just for humanity in general? Is God too big and too important with better things to do than to concern Himself with my little troubles, great as they are to me? Well, sometimes the littlest things carry the most weight. Just maybe a personal letter is in the Bible to say to us that ***Christ is a personal Redeemer***, who redeems this life, not just the next, and who sometimes does so in the most personal of ways, through a letter, or a conversation, or an act of friendship. In other words, a personal letter in the Bible says that Christ personally cares for you.

The Bible tells of the universal gospel of Christ, the good news that while we all were yet sinners, hostile in nature to God, and dead in our sins, out of His great love for us, Christ died

for us, so God can forgive us and save us to forever be His own redeemed people. It consists of the universal gospel presented in histories, law, prophecy, psalms, wisdom, narratives, letters to churches, revelation, and here in the book of Philemon, in a personal letter regarding one specific situation in the lives of three specific people. You could say the personal letter from Paul to Philemon is the universal gospel made personal.

There was a time, twenty-five years ago, when we received a letter just like this. Actually, my lovely wife, Lori, received it from a friend in our old Bible study group that met in our house, while she was away from home for months at a time, touring with her band. I actually hand delivered it, because I flew out to where she was to visit for a weekend. And it read something like this: *“To Lori, a true daughter in the faith, and our beloved and faithful sister, from the church that is in your house in Oakland, grace and peace from our Lord Jesus Christ. We give thanks to God, praying for you always ...”* and you get the picture. I still don’t really know what was in that letter for it wasn’t written to me. But when she read it, I remember seeing her sitting in the summer evening outside the studio, weeping over the personal gospel spoken to her by a true friend in Christ.

If you ever wonder whether God actually cares about you, then the gospel made personal like it is in the letter to Philemon is for you. And if you know someone who wonders whether God could care about them personally, then maybe they haven’t yet heard His gospel applied to their personal life. I’ve entitled this message today “The Gospel Made Personal.” Here’s how it starts in the book of Philemon:

Philem 1-3 - ¹ Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, to Philemon our beloved brother and fellow worker, ² and to Apphia our sister, (*some say she is Philemon’s wife*) and to Archippus our fellow soldier (*some say he is their son*), and to the church in your house; ³ Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

This is how letters began back then, with addresses, from Paul in prison to Philemon in his house, followed by the standard tagline Paul used in all his letters: *“Grace to you and peace from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.”*¹ Then beginning in the next line, you can see the personal nature of this letter, in all the ‘I’s’ and ‘my’s,’ ‘you’s’ and ‘your’s’, and especially the ‘you, brother’ at the end.

Philem 4-7 - ⁴ I (*Paul*) thank my God always, making mention of you (*Philemon*) in my prayers, ⁵ because I hear of your love and of the faith which you have toward the Lord Jesus and toward all the saints; ⁶ and I pray that the fellowship of your faith may become effective through the knowledge of every good thing which is in you for Christ’s sake. ⁷ For I have come to have much joy and comfort in your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through **you, brother**.

And like any letter, there are two parties involved, the sender and the receiver, in this case, Paul and Philemon. We’ll look at Paul, the sender, next week. Today, we’ll look at Philemon, the receiver of the letter, and ask ourselves whether we have what it takes to receive and not

¹ Rom 1:7, 1Cor 1:3, 2Cor 1:2, Gal 1:3, Eph 1:2, Phil 1:2, Col 1:2, 1Thes 1:1, 2Thes 1:2, 1Tim 1:2, 2Tim 1:2, Ti 1:4

reject the gospel applied personally to our lives like it is in this letter to Philemon. As we go through the letter, I’d like us to consider these three pre-conditions we must have in order to receive and not reject the gospel: (1) an openness to being wrong; (2) a willingness to change my mind; and (3) forgiveness in heart. It is my hope that as a result, we will be ready to receive the gospel of Christ whenever it is made personal to us.

Open to Being Wrong

Open to being wrong. Now the personal letter to Philemon in its essence is what a friend of mine calls “carefrontation,” -- caring enough to confront.

Philem 8-16 – ⁸Therefore, though I have enough confidence in Christ to order you to do what is proper, ⁹ yet for love’s sake I rather appeal to you (*carefront*) -- since I am such a person as Paul, an ambassador, and now also a prisoner (*in Rome*) of Christ Jesus -- ¹⁰ I appeal to you for my child Onesimus, whom I have begotten in my imprisonment (*meaning he was with Paul in Rome and saved by faith there*), ¹¹ who formerly was useless to you, but now is useful both to you and to me (*a play on words, since ‘onesimus’ means useful; it may be his Christian name*). ¹² I have sent him back to you in person, that is, sending my very heart, ¹³ whom I wished to keep with me, so that on your behalf he might minister to me in my imprisonment for the gospel; ¹⁴ but without your consent I did not want to do anything, so that your goodness would not be, in effect, by compulsion but of your own free will.

When Paul says that “*for love’s sake I rather appeal to you,*” and “*without your consent I did not want to do anything,*” and “*your goodness (would be) of your own free will,*” he is saying something about Philemon, -- that he thinks Philemon won’t take carefrontation wrong, that he is a man who is open to being wrong, who can accept it when his ways aren’t God’s ways. In other words, Paul believes Philemon is an approachable man. My same friend who coined the phrase “carefrontation” often starts off points he makes with “*Now, I’m not against the idea of being wrong.*” That’s the attitude Paul seems to think Philemon already has.

And that makes me wonder about myself. Am I open to being wrong? Am I approachable? Do I take correction or criticism well? Am I so approachable that each of you feel you could carefront me? Or am I a stubborn mule who has to be ordered around? At the very bottom of it is whether am I my own ruler, right in my own eyes and self-righteous in heart, or am I under Christ’s rule, clothed in Christ’s righteousness. Christ promises to credit my faith in Him as perfect righteousness before Him.² The real question behind whether I’m open to being wrong is do I believe it, that righteousness (right-ness) comes by faith in Christ, and not by faith in me. The real question is whether I believe the gospel.

Now Philemon believes the gospel, for Paul writes, “*I hear of your love and of the faith which you have toward the Lord Jesus*” So, Paul approaches him. Why? What is the reason? By piecing together details in the book of Philemon with details in Colossians, another book of the Bible written by Paul, we can figure it out. Paul and Epaphras, were prisoners, likely

² Rom 4:20-24

under house arrest in Rome. And with them there were some of the luminaries of the early church, Timothy, Luke, a few others. From confinement, Paul wrote a personal letter to Philemon, who has a church in his house, as well as general letters to a few churches for all to read. And in the letter to the Colossians, Paul says he sent them by the hand of Tychicus, who had to travel some 1,200 miles by land and sea to deliver them to the churches.

Col 4:7-9 - ⁷ Tychicus, our beloved brother and faithful servant and fellow bond-servant in the Lord, will bring you (Colossians) information. ⁸ For I have sent him to you ... ⁹ and with him Onesimus, our faithful and beloved brother, who is one of your number.

And Paul adds that with Tychicus, he also sent another “*faithful and beloved brother*” in Christ, Onesimus, who is “*one of your number*,” which means he’s from Colossae. This is the same Onesimus in the personal letter to Philemon! Now back to Philemon:

Philem 15-18 – ¹⁵ For perhaps he (*Onesimus*) was for this reason (*salvation*) separated from you for a while, that you would have him back forever, ¹⁶ no longer as a slave, but more than a slave, a beloved brother, especially to me, but how much more to you, both in the flesh (*blood brothers?!*) and in the Lord (*now reborn brothers in Christ*). ¹⁷ If then you regard me a partner, accept him as you would me. ¹⁸ But if he has wronged you in any way (*because he has*) or owes you anything (*because he does*), charge that to my account;

Here’s the final key detail: Onesimus likely was Philemon’s slave and blood brother! This was not uncommon. A half-brother could be born a slave. And a full brother could squander his living, and fall into great debt, or trouble with the law, or servitude to someone like the “Mob”, endangering the entire household, and therefore have to become a ward of his older brother. It’s like Jesus’s story about the prodigal son, except that he has wronged his older brother, who is the head of the household and master. The passage does not say how or if he has wronged his brother. But one likely scenario is Onesimus fell into such trouble that Philemon had to take him as his slave and then lend him out to those whom Onesimus was indebted.

So, this detail that Onesimus is Philemon’s brother in the flesh means they were both from Colossae. It means Philemon’s house church was the Colossian church. And it means Philemon’s useless brother, was a fugitive slave fleeing his servitude, who likely wronged Philemon and stole from him, who somehow ended up half a continent away in Rome at the door of Paul’s cell, who then heard the gospel, was saved by faith in Christ, and is now counted among the brethren as a “*faithful and beloved brother*” in Christ.

From Philemon’s point of view, he is a wealthy landowner, who was himself already saved by faith in Christ, who had the Colossian church in his house, whose useless brother became his slave, wronged him, stole from him, and then disappeared. And then one day, two gentlemen appear at his door with a letter for the church and a personal letter for him from the great Paul the Apostle, and when he looks up, one of men at his door is his useless, thieving, lying, brother, the fugitive slave. Such a shocking moment. You can imagine the first words said are, “Brother, so sorry, please read this, it’s from Paul.” You can imagine how hard it would be to believe anything he said. You’d remember how he wronged you. How he stole from

you. How he just disappeared. How much trouble he was. You might think things got better after he left. You might feel guilty thinking that. And then there’s the law that allows you to do whatever you please to a slave, that crucified fugitive slaves as an example to them all to never leave their servitude.

What to do? Some of us have Onesimus’s in our lives -- people who bring trouble. And yet Christ saves them the same way He saved us when we were trouble, through faith credited as righteousness. And Christ gives them the same Holy Spirit that He gave us when we first believed. And Christ makes them brothers and sisters of equal standing before Him. So, I may be open to being wrong; but when my Onesimus appears at my door, what to do?

Willing to Change My Mind

Which brings us to a second pre-condition necessary to receive the gospel made personal: a willingness to change my mind, to be teachable. I may be open to being wrong but for consequence reasons be unteachable, unwilling to change my mind. Once I was the technical lead on a Federal water pollution case where the owner of a chrome plating shop was accused of dumping toxic chemicals while it rained, so that the toxins would wash away to the river. That’s illegal in America, by the way. In the parking lot that was a foot lower in elevation than the building was a big red stain, like what chromic acid would leave. And uphill inside the building was a path of red staining under a chromic acid tank, along the floor, to the building wall, and out to the parking lot. When I asked the owner about the red stain, he said it was from a busted car radiator. But I said, the stain starts up hill. How is it possible for antifreeze to go up hill into the building? And I took an ink pen and placed it on the side of the building, and miracle of miracle, because gravity is the law, it rolled down into the parking lot. To which he, said, “Well, that’s my story, I’m sticking to it.” He essentially was saying that while he might be wrong about what happened, he’s unwilling to change his mind that it wasn’t his chromic acid -- because of consequences, like jail.

What Paul wants Philemon to do is to “*accept him as you would me,*” which means at the very least seeing Paul and Onesimus as equals. And to do that would require Philemon to greatly change his mind about Onesimus. Now I might be an approachable guy open to being wrong about my brother, but for consequence reasons, like his track-record of untrustworthiness, or his lying, or his dangerous ways, I might not change my mind about letting him back into my life. But, this second pre-condition to receiving the personal gospel is not a requirement, but a willingness, to change my mind, if persuaded. So, Paul persuades.

Philem 19-21 – ¹⁹ I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand, I will repay it (not to mention to you that you owe to me even your own self as well). ²⁰ Yes, brother, let me benefit from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in Christ. ²¹ Having confidence in your obedience, I write to you, since I know that you will do even more than what I say.

Paul persuades by vouching for Onesimus that he is trustworthy, writing out in his own hand a promissory note to pay off all debts. He says that to “*accept him as you would me*” would be “*a benefit from you in the Lord,*” a gift given to a man in prison, that would “*refresh my heart in Christ.*” But much more than that, Paul had already said that Onesimus is now a

beloved brother in Christ. If you were Philemon, this would mean the real persuasive fact to consider is that Onesimus has been transformed by Christ just like you were upon hearing the same gospel, that He has been reborn a new man, just like you were, that he’s no longer a slave but now a beloved brother in the royal family of Christ the King, just like you are. The new fact is Paul, Philemon, and Onesimus are now brothers of equal standing before the Lord.

So, when Paul then writes of “*having confidence in your obedience, I write to you, since I know that you will do even more than what I say,*” he is saying that he sees Philemon as that rare man who is persuadable, teachable, willing to change his mind, if persuaded, no matter the consequences. And that makes we wonder about myself. Am I persuadable? Am I teachable? Am I willing to change my mind no matter the consequences? I think the best way to gauge this, is to see if I’ve changed my mind in the past. Have I ever changed my mind about anything before? Or were my core beliefs set in stone by my upbringing, heritage, and culture? The willingness to change our minds irrespective of the consequences is absolutely necessary to be able to receive the gospel made personal, because the gospel transforms us. We don’t stay as we were. We become like Christ. As Paul writes in the letter to the Colossian church:

Col 3:10-11 – ¹⁰ (You) have put off the old man with his deeds, and have put on the new man, who is renewed in knowledge according to the image of Him who created him, ¹¹ where there is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcised nor uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave nor free, but Christ is all and in all.

It will be no small thing for Philemon to change his mind over what he believes about Onesimus, about his worth as a man and his standing in God’s family, about slavery and emancipation, about debt and restitution, about wrongs done and salvation. Taking on these consequences will require belief in that this is what God’s goodness looks like. And it will be a monumental task to not resent Onesimus, even if he is wholly transformed to be like Christ.

Forgiving in Heart

Which brings us to the third pre-condition necessary to receive the gospel made personal, and that is to have a heart of forgiveness. This is really what Paul is asking Philemon to do, to forgive his formerly useless fugitive brother, Onesimus. However, the letter never says to forgive. Instead the simple appeal to Philemon from Paul is to “*accept him as you would me,*” which has further meaning as Paul invites himself to stay with Philemon.

Philem 22 – ²² At the same time also prepare me a lodging, for I hope that through your prayers I will be given to you (*after release from prison*).

In other words, for Philemon to accept Onesimus as he accepts Paul is to be so reconciled, so in agreement, so honored to have him, and so grateful over his release from his (spiritual) prison, that he takes him into to his home as his beloved brother. With Paul that would be easy because there is no baggage between them. But with Onesimus there is all the baggage to overcome. There are the debts to cancel. There are the wrongs to forget. There is his release from slavery to purchase. There is all the hurt and resentment to give away to God. At the heart of it, there is all the forgiveness to be given. If you were in Philemon’s shoes,

the call to forgive Onesimus would drive you to your knees in prayer. For from scripture we know the reason to forgive:

Col 3:13 – ¹³ ... just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you (forgive).

And the necessity to do so:

Mark 11:25 – ²⁵ ... if you have anything against anyone, forgive him, that your Father in heaven may also forgive you your trespasses.

And how far we must go:

Matt 18:35 – ³⁵ ... (you must forgive) from your heart.

But who can do it? We can only forgive by faith. We can believe the Lord and be obedient to do the actions that go with forgiveness. That’s faith. For example, by faith, out of obedience to the Lord, Philemon can pay Onesimus’ debts and purchase his emancipation. He can prepare a place for him to stay. He can give him a part in the family business or help him go back to Paul as a freedman. But who can take the bitterness out of his own heart every time he remembers the harm his brother did to him? Who can just decide to be forgiving in heart? If we’re honest, we know we can’t change our own hearts, only the Lord can. In other words, it’s our job to forgive by faith, but the Lord’s job to complete the work of forgiveness in our hearts. So, I would guess Philemon eventually came to pray something to the effect of:

“O Lord, my beloved brother, Paul, has brought to my attention the plight of my lost brother Onesimus, and You have said to me to forgive him. O Lord, I agree, and I want to, because I know You have forgiven me. But I can’t do it myself, I can’t take this pain out of me. I don’t have the power to forgive him from the heart. You’re going to have to do it for me.”

And that’s where the rest of the story starts, really where every story of redemption starts, on our knees in prayer to Jesus Christ, our personal redeemer who makes us forgiving of one another in heart.

The Genius and the Power of The Personal Gospel

So, here’s a few questions to ask yourself to see if you can receive the gospel when it is made personal to you. Hearing the gospel is the start. Then we respond with faith in Him. And Christ redeems. So, were Philemon and Onesimus redeemed? Did Philemon accept Onesimus as his beloved brother in Christ? Were they reconciled in life? Did the Colossian church prosper with a great example of Christian forgiveness and reconciliation of these two brothers front and center? Probably, but we don’t know. They’re not mentioned again. But there are signs they lived in Christian forgiveness, reconciled as beloved brothers redeemed by Christ. The first is existence of a Saint Onesimus who later was a Bishop of the churches around that region. He may or may not be our Onesimus, but the early Orthodox church thought he was. And then there is the existence of the letter itself. It was Philemon’s personal property. It seems very unlikely to have been preserved unless Philemon, a leader of the Colossian church,

carried through with it, and wanted it saved. In any case, this personal letter of the gospel made personal is enshrined in the Bible.

There is genius and there is power in God’s plan for us to minister the gospel of Christ personally to each other. We have His Word if we want it. And Christ has given each of us who are saved, His Spirit, who teaches us all things and brings to mind His Word.³ And all of us together are the Body of Christ,⁴ able to minister Christ personally to each other, giving and receiving the gospel made personal in every situation, becoming all of us like Christ together.⁵ Therefore, one final point. In order to receive the gospel made personal, we have to already live our lives together in Christian community. It’s fitting that Paul ends his personal letter to Philemon with the greetings of the community around him.

Philem 23-24 – ²³ Epaphras (*from Colossae*), my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, greets you, ²⁴ as do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, Luke, my fellow workers.

* * *

The gospel made personal is powerful. It’s worth it to be people who can receive it. Let me end by telling you of its power, from a time in my life when we received the gospel made personal to us and it resulted in a great redemption. You remember how Lori received a personal letter like Philemon’s? Well, here’s the whole story.

Our marriage was in grave danger. She was away touring as a musician, with the whole world praising her, and I was chasing her away with grim disapproval. I was too jealous to be a husband, and she was too drawn by the world to be a wife. We were on edge of a cliff, about to fall, and lose it all. And so, one day, in that Bible study that met in our house, I was lamenting my troubles, and these two friends, who were not great founts of wisdom on marriage, looked up at me and one said, “When she’s home you should be happy with her,” while the other said, “Yep, that’s right.” They spoke the gospel made personal to me. So, that’s what I did. Instead of grim we-need-to-talk disapproval, I decided to be happy with her when she was home. “Hey, you’re home. I’m so glad to see you. How was New York? I’d love to go there with you someday. Would you like me to get take-out?” Lori would say that was the turning point. That also is what caused me to go to my knees. I could be happy with her, but “Lord, I give it to You to fix our marriage, to make me happy in You, to keep me from resentment.” I acted in faith and prayed for Him to change my heart.

Then not long after, I decided to go visit her where her band was recording. That true friend in the Bible study gave me that letter to take to her. That first night, in the summer evening outside the studio, she read it -- “*To Lori, a true daughter in the faith, and our beloved and faithful sister, from the church that is in your house in Oakland, grace and peace from our Lord Jesus Christ. We give thanks to God, praying for you always ...*.” I will never forget her weeping in the night, how beautiful she was, how beloved she was. She says after she read it she prayed, “O Lord, I don’t want to stay, so please don’t let me go.” Two days later, we went to her parents’ church. And miracle of miracles, the sermon was on how to guard your

³ John 14:26

⁴ 1Cor 12:12-31, Rom 12:4-5, Eph 4:4

⁵ Rom 12:1-2, 1Cor 3:18, 1John 3:2, Rom 8:29

marriage. At the end, the preacher asked all who would commit to guard their marriage, to stand up. Then we stood up, and here we are. We acted in faith but Christ did it all, making us open to each other, and willing toward each other, and forgiving of each other in heart. He did it all.

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

Thanks be to God our Father, and Jesus Christ our Savior, who answers prayers and doesn’t let us go, who speaks the gospel to us personally through our friends, who once had a personal letter sent to Philemon and once to Lori, for Christ cares for each of us personally. All we do is receive His gospel made personal and pray for God to save us. And He will.

Believers, please pray with me.

Non-believers, let me pray for you.