

Talk – Philemon – Relationships transformed in Faith

Bible Reading/s

Philemon

Central Truth

The gospel transforms people – and so it should transform the way we relate to people.

Purpose

I want to listener to recognise the transforming power of the gospel in restoring and shaping relationship before that of station, distinction or history.

Outline

An Uneasy Story

From Prison to a House Church (1-3)

There are three relationships in view –

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Faith in the Lord Jesus and Love for all the Saints (4-7)

A Request (8-20)

Appeal on the basis of love

Slave to Brother

Secular Status Vs Spiritual Status

Relationships transformed in Faith (21-25)

Gospel Shaped Forgiveness

Who is Onesimus today?

Who is Philemon today?

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CHECK TIME

Talk

Prayer

Dear Lord and Father,

We long for perfect relationships – ones free of pain and hurt.

Yet we see in the world and in ourselves so much which does not seem right.

And then we look at Jesus.

Father transform the way that we think and conduct our relationships so that we might display the gospel in our lives.

AMEN.

An Uneasy Story

- Several years ago, I was in North India – I was there to teach Pastors and key leaders a Bible subject.
 - One of the Indian men I met told me his story.
 - He used to recruit – and by that, I mean kidnap - children for the Indian sex industry.
 - And here he was with 50 Christian Pastors – learning the salvation plan of God from Genesis to Revelation.
 - He was there because he had become a Christian. He had given his life to Christ. He had been transformed by the gospel.
 - In becoming a Christian, he had given up his ‘job’, turned away from kidnapping children and had now found himself alongside a whole bunch of Christian Pastors.
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- I remember the unease that I felt hearing this man’s story.
 - What of all the little lives that he had ruined?
 - How could the organization I was working for justify allowing this man into a position of influence over others, when he had previously abused that privilege?
 - In other words, how is it possible to forgive?
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- Phi-lemon, shows us that *the gospel transforms people – and so it should transform the way we relate to people.*
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- Let’s see what we can get from this little letter.
 - By the way, as you may have already picked up – Phi-lemon can also be pronounced Phil-emon. I will do my best to pronounce it Phi-lemon!
 - Let’s not get too pedantic on this one, or you might get me calling him Phi-LEMON or referring to One-see-mus!

Talk – Philemon – Relationships transformed in Faith

From Prison to a House Church (1-3)

- The apostle Paul is writing from prison to his friends Phi-lemon and Apphia and Archippus – and in fact the whole church meeting in their home – you can see that in verse 1.
- So, from a prisoner (who calls himself a prisoner of the Christ Jesus) to a House Church

- By now, having looked at the letter in Bible Study, you would be familiar with the three main characters of the letter.
- There are three relationships in view –
 1. The relationship between the Apostle Paul and his friend Phi-lemon.
 - It is possible that Phi-lemon had become a Christian under Paul prior to this. In verse 19, Paul makes some reference to Phi-lemon owing him his very life.

 2. Then there is the relationship between Paul and the slave Onesimus.
 - It is probable that Onesimus had also become a Christian under Paul – verse 10 suggests that Paul now thinks of him as a son.

 3. And then finally there is the relationship between Phi-lemon and Onesimus.
 - This relationship is a little more problematic.
 - Onesimus is Phi-lemon's slave.
 - For whatever reason these two had had a falling out.
 - The exact nature of what Onesimus did, is not stated – perhaps he has stolen from his master and run away – which verses 18–19 suggest.

- Paul writes to mend this relationship.
- It reads like a private letter – yet it was written for the church to publicly hear (and for us to read).

Illustration

- I was at a clergy dinner once, when the Archdeacon announced to the whole room that one of the ministers there was retiring.
- It was quite clear that that was a complete surprise to the minister in question!
- Paul here writes a public letter compelling Phi-lemon to accept Onesimus despite the wrong this slave had done.
- This has the effect of compelling Phi-lemon to do what it is that Paul asks but also of restoring Onesimus in the eyes of the church.

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- Right, lets quickly fly through the letter.

Faith in the Lord Jesus and Love for all the Saints (4-7)

- In verses 4-7, Paul commends Phi-lemon.
- He gives thanks to God – because he hears about the way that Phi-lemon has been living out his *faith* – and he has heard about Phi-lemons *love* for ‘all’ his holy people.
- He is going to call upon that faith and love in a moment when he will ask Phi-lemon to accept Onesimus back.
- Paul prays that Phi-lemon would continue to share his faith – because he knows that in sharing his faith he continues to be refreshed such that he will be reminded of all the good things he has in Christ.

Application

- When you see Christians living out their faith in love it is indeed attractive.
- We see that today. You see that here at Terrace Studies. It gives us great joy to see sisters sharing their faith – it is encouraging.
- Right now, as we speak – the final day of JesusWORKS is happening.
 - Anna Stoyanoff is explaining her faith to six lovely women whom she will ask to join us in faith.
 - Those women are there because they were invited to your *Christmas in July* event – where others shared their faith.
- That is encouraging and should bring us great joy.
- It highlights the ways which we are partners together in the gospel.
- Paul expresses that same kind of sentiment here in verse 7 about Phi-lemon – *‘Your love has given me great joy and encouragement because you have refreshed the hearts of the Lord’s people.’*

A Request (8-20)

- Okay, we are a third of the way into the letter, and Paul has not yet raised his reason for writing.
- From verses 8-20 – we see his request.

Appeal on the basis of love

- Paul says, I could be bold and order you to do what I say, but instead I want to appeal on the basis of love.
- I have heard about your love in faith, I hope that you are going to choose to demonstrate that again – in this particular instance.
- And now he raises Onesimus.
- Verse 10 – I appeal to you for my son Onesimus – I have met him while imprisoned and it was during this time that he became my son – presumable it was in prison that Onesimus has become a Christian.

Slave to Brother

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- This slave was now a brother.
- This man Onesimus, whose name meant ‘Useful’ had been useless, but now for Paul had become useful. And Paul commends him back to master Philemon.
- Now – I don’t think it is that hard to imagine the kind of emotions this must have brought up for Philemon.
- This slave, who may have robbed him or in the least deserted him has caused a certain degree of pain and hurt.
- Under law, Philemon would be well within his rights to have this man incarcerated or worse – slaves didn’t have any rights.
- This letter is not pronouncing Onesimus innocent or denying his wrong doing.
- Nor is this letter defending or upholding the idea of slavery – it just recognizes the reality that was a feature of first century life.
- Onesimus in a secular sense had no leg to stand on.
- He had done wrong.
- Paul now steps in and advocates for him.

Secular Status Vs Spiritual Status

- Verse 12 – I am sending him back to you. He is very dear to me – in fact I would like to have him back, but I know that is not right – he is your slave Philemon, so I send him back to you with the hope that you will accept his new status in the Lord and forgive him.
- What Paul does is show that the *gospel transforms people – and so it should transform the way we relate to people.*
- Becoming Christian is of an order that rises above class, race, distinction and even past history.
- Paul says in verse 16 – this slave is not longer a slave, he is now better than a slave, he is a dear brother.
 - This slave is no longer useless due to his past mistakes, he is useful.
 - This slave is no longer socially trash, he is a fellow man and dear to an Apostle of the Lord
 - and so he should be dear to Philemon as well – why?
 - because Onesimus and Philemon are now brothers.
 - No longer should secular status be more important than spiritual status.

Illustration

- Let me return to my Indian friend.
- In becoming Christian, this man was no longer most notable for being a *child slave kidnapper* – he was now more notably a *child of Jesus*.
- That should tell you something of the magnitude of what Jesus did to forgive sin.

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- Jesus died on the cross to bring people to God.
- In order to do that he had to do something about their sin.
- *'While we were still sinners, Christ died for us'* (Rom 5:8)
- *'Christ died for sins, once and for all – the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God'* (1 Peter 3:18).

- And if dying for sins, has cancelled the penalty for sin, then the next step is to recognise that all who stand in Jesus, stand alongside those who have also been forgiven.
- That makes our status equal to all those in Christ.

- But this friends, can be hard.
- Our relationships are not perfect.
- There are people who have hurt us – sometimes hurt us in devastating ways.
- To forgive can be a tall order.

Relationships transformed in Faith (21-25)

- Paul understands that. He is not attempting to wipe away the hurt as if it didn't matter.
- He understands that when it comes to sin, that someone always loses out.
- And so, he says in verse 18 – if Onesimus has done you wrong or owes you anything, charge it to me – I will pay it back.
- To restore this relationship, someone will lose out – and Paul is willing for that to be himself – he will pay in order to free Onesimus from his debt.
- If that is what it takes for Phi-lemon to welcome back Onesimus, then Paul is happy to pay.
- Can you see, he is effectively offering to do what Jesus has done.
- He is willing to pay the debt, so that the one he loves can go free.

- But Paul is no Jesus.
- In fact, Paul stands forgiven for exactly the same reason why Philemon stands forgiven.
- And Paul stands forgiven for exactly the same reason why Onesimus stands forgiven
 - Because each of them have been saved by Jesus.
 - They each have been transformed by the gospel.

- And so, Paul says to Philemon – verse 17, if you are a partner with me in the gospel, then welcome Onesimus because he now is also a partner in the gospel with you.
- *The gospel transforms people – and so it should transform the way we relate to people.*

Talk – Philemon – Relationships transformed in Faith

- I was talking to Simon Marshman (one of the other Pastors at Trinity City) about this passage – and he made a really helpful comment.
- He said (words to the effect) ‘If the purpose of this letter was to get Philemon to accept Onesimus, then Paul could have made this letter even shorter – he could have written ‘Hi Philemon, it’s Paul, I am instructing you to accept Onesimus back’ – and be over and done with it!
- But he doesn’t, he takes to opportunity to flesh this out, because he wants to show how the *gospel transforms people – and how it should transform the way we in turn relate to others.*

PAUSE

- The letter then finishes with some quick housekeeping matters to do with Paul’s hopeful visit and then some greetings from mutual friends.

Gospel Shaped Forgiveness

- Right, let me make one final comment about forgiveness and then see if we can apply this.
- This letter calls for a *gospel shaped forgiveness* – and the result should be some element of *restoration* – especially among brothers (or sisters) who share the same faith.
- I realise that can be incredibly hard – and will in most cases take time.
- That said, even though this is calling for a gospel shaped forgiveness – I don’t think that implies *forgetfulness*. I don’t see that Paul is asking Philemon to forget what Onesimus has done.
- Perhaps moving forward, that knowledge and history would shape what these two brothers did together, if anything at all.
- You may have noted, that Paul suggested that he would have liked to keep Onesimus with himself given how useful he had become. It might be that Paul is requesting that Philemon does grant him his forgiveness, but then releases him back into Paul’s ongoing care.
- When we have been hurt by another – it also hurts to forgive. There is a double hurt.
- As indeed those who have forgiven us will have felt that double hurt if they have graciously forgiven us.
- That experience will work to shape us as we move forward – that does not mean we ignore or try to forget the hurt – that gift may come from God over time.
- Wisdom would say that you can be careful in relation to the person or that circumstance such that you don’t end up in the situation again – as much as you have and ability to control the factors. And I do realise that often there are factors which are out of our control.

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- For example – back to my Indian friend, whilst he was present at that course for Pastors and Key leaders – he had been restricted to the role of organizer.
- He had been told that although he had become a Christian, and was welcome and now involved in the church family, that he was not to be put into a role as Pastor as that would give him oversight of children.
- What he had done as a child sex kidnapper – as hideous as it was, was *forgiven* in Christ. But not *forgotten* in the sense that going forward there were some element of Church family life that were no longer open to him.

Who is Onesimus today?

Now some application:

- Who today would be our Onesimus? We don't have slaves in the same way as they did back then.
- Could it be the person in the wider Christian family - who has stolen from us, or the person who has hurts us under the influence of alcohol, or the child-sex offender, or the ex-boyfriend, or ex-husband.
- Could it be the brother or sister in our church family who has hurt us in some way – intentionally or not?
- Could it be the church leader who has been unhelpful or inconsiderate or uninformed in the way that have interacted with you?
- Who is the Onesimus who needs your forgiveness?
- Because friends, if you consider yourself a Christian – then your gospel *transforms people (even those who have hurt you)*.

Who is Philemon today?

Perhaps a better question, and I'll finish with this. A better question for each of us is this:

In what ways are we like Phi-lemon?

- What does the gospel ask of us – in our relationships?
- How should the gospel transform the way you relate to others in our church family?
- Because friends, if you consider yourself a Christian – then your gospel *transforms people (and that includes you) – so how should it transform the way you in turn relate to others?*

Let's pray

Dear Lord and Father,

We long for perfect relationships – ones free of pain and hurt.

Yet we see in in ourselves and in the world so much which does not seem right.

Help us to look at Jesus. And transform the way that we think and conduct our relationships so that we might display the gospel in our lives.

AMEN.