

## How The Gospel Works In Real Life

### Philemon 17-25

Introduction: 1) The apostle Paul was a “gospel saturated man.” Students of Philemon would no doubt agree, but they would probably find it strange that I would make this statement when studying a letter where the word “gospel” only appears once in the entire book (v. 13)! Some have even said if Philemon were not in the Bible, our loss would be minimal, especially in terms of theology. I was once guilty of such a position. I was wrong. The fact is the gospel of King Jesus oozes out of this letter for those with ears to hear and eyes to see.

2) W.A. Criswell who pastored FBC Dallas and was a powerful preacher saw this. He saw that what Paul pledged to do for Onesimus mirrors beautifully what Jesus has done for us. In a sermon entitled, “For Love’s Sake,” preached on February 1, 1959, he brought his message to a close with these words (slightly adjusted from the transcription available at [wacriswell.org](http://wacriswell.org)): “[Onesimus] must repay what he owes, but how? He doesn’t have anything to pay with; he’s a slave. He has nothing. And, restitution has to be made, and how? Onesimus holds in his hand the letter: “accept him as you would me. And if he has wronged you in any way, or owes you anything, charge that to my account. I, Paul, write this with my own hand: I will repay it.” Does that remind you of anything else? Does that remind you of you? Does it?

Does that remind you of our Lord, our Savior, standing before God? We owe to God how many instances where we've fallen short. Our debt to God; and the Lord seeks payment, and we have nothing wherewithal to pay. How would you remunerate God? How would you repay God what you owe the Lord? How would you do it? Fallen short, fallen short, in a thousand ways, in a thousand days, how would you repay? How would you pay?

“Lord, I have nothing with which to pay. My righteousness is as filthy rags [Isaiah 64:6]. All of the goodness of my life is as a stained garment. I have nothing wherewithal to pay my debt to God, what I owe the Lord.” And our Lord says, “If he hath wronged thee, or oweth thee aught, put that on Mine account; I will pay it.” And when we stand before the Lord, and the Lord would meet out to us the penalty of our sins – what is that? “The wages of sin is death [Romans 6:23]...And the soul that sins shall die” [Ezekiel 18:20]. – and we stand before the Lord, and the Lord looks into your face, and asks you, “Are you guilty? Have you ever sinned?”

“Guilty.”

“Did you do this wrong?”

“Guilty.”

“Do you owe this debt?”

“Guilty.” And we stand in the presence of Him who searches the soul and who knows the heart. “Lord, You know I am guilty.” Like the cry of Job, “I have sinned; what shall I do unto Thee, O thou preserver of men?” [Job 7:20]. Guilty; and the penalty is death. “And the wages of sin is death.” And our great Savior says, “If he had wronged thee, or oweth thee aught, put that on Mine account; I will pay it.” And that death of our Lord was a substitutionary death; it was for you, it was for us. He died in our stead. He took our place. He paid our debt. He paid the debt, He washed us in His own blood, and He died in our stead, and we have life, and freedom, and glory, and forgiveness all because He paid it all. “If he hath wronged thee, or oweth thee aught, put that on mine account; I Paul have written it with mine own hand, I will repay it.” And that’s the gospel message that we preach.”

3) In the final verses of Philemon, we indeed see the gospel working in real life. Both by analogy and application to life, we see Paul mirror the gospel and apply the gospel. There is no allegory taking place in what follows. We simply honor, as we always should, a historical-grammatical-theological hermeneutic that rightly exalts Christ in all of Scripture. Three marvelous principles emerge to guide our study.

I. Practice the basics of the gospel

vv. 17-20

- All of us who live under the Lordship of King Jesus must never forget who we once were. All of us were once like Onesimus, runaway slaves (sinners) from our rightful owner (God). But, someone stepped in on our behalf, pled our case and even offered to pay our debt! Paul never forgot this, and so he puts into practice in the Onesimus/Philemon issue the basic principles of the gospels, principles of substitution, satisfaction and reconciliation.
- Paul's argument is a masterpiece. Up and until this point in the letter there has not been a single imperative. Now he peppers the letter with 3 in rapid-fire succession: “accept” (v. 17), 2) “charge” (v. 18) and 3) “refresh” (v. 20). A 4<sup>th</sup> imperative appears in verse 22 (“prepare”). The rhetorical strategy is stellar and intended for maximum impact. “Paul comes out in the open and makes a direct request of Philemon” (Moo, 425).

1) Remember the principle of substitution v. 17

- “So if you consider me” (Lit. “If, therefore, me,” fronted for emphasis) if you consider me a partner (Gr. *koinonon*), accept (1<sup>st</sup> imp) him as you would me.” Paul's words are astonishing.

Breathtaking. Give to your slave Onesimus the same acceptance and welcome you would give to me. When you see him see me! The same reaction you would have if I had knocked at your door I want

you to give to this slave, one who is now “a dearly loved brother” (v. 16).

- Warren Wiersbe, for many years a faithful pastor at The Moody Church in Chicago sees what is going down in this request: “This is to me an illustration of what Jesus Christ has done for us as believers. God’s people are so identified with Jesus Christ that God receives them as He receives His Son! We are “accepted in the Beloved” (Eph. 1:6) and clothed in His righteousness (2 Cor. 5:21). We certainly cannot approach God with any merit of our own, but God must receive us when we come to Him “in Jesus Christ.” The word *receive* in verse 17 means “to receive into one’s family circle.” Imagine a slave entering his master’s family! But imagine a guilty sinner entering God’s family!” (*Be Faithful*, 172).

## 2) Remember the principle of satisfaction

v. 18-19

- Paul carries his request a 2<sup>nd</sup> step and says, “And if he has wronged you in any way (something Onesimus almost certainly had done), or owes you anything, charge that to my account. I, Paul, ... will repay it.” Paul says don’t worry; I will make satisfaction for any debt owed to you by Philemon. “I, Paul, write this with my own hand” indicates he takes the pen, for a moment, from his secretary to whom he is

dictating the letter (probably Timothy). “He gave Philemon his personal handwritten I.O.U.” (Polhill, *Paul and His Letters*, 347).

The words “charge” and “repay” come from the world of commerce, the world of finances. I will take on his indebtedness. I will make good on any damages you have suffered. I will satisfy the demands of the law and the wounded party.

- What is going on here is a reflection of what theologians call the doctrine of penal satisfaction or imputation. Wiersbe is again simple but helpful in his brief comments: “Theologians call this “the doctrine of imputation.” (To “impute” means “to put it on account.”) When Jesus Christ died on the cross, my sins were put on His account; and He was treated the way I should have been treated. When I trusted Him as my Savior, His righteousness was put on my account; and now God accepts me in Jesus Christ. Jesus said to the Father, “He no longer owes You a debt because I paid it fully on the cross. Receive him as You would receive Me. Let him come into the family circle!” (*Be Faithful*, 172).
- Paul then does a very sly thing! I don’t know how else to describe it. He turns up the heat with a not so gentle reminder: I won’t mention to you that you own me even your own self (ie. Your very own soul)!

Wow! Boom! Knockout punch! You are in debt to me for your eternal soul. Onesimus's debt appears pretty small in comparison. Paul says he won't bring it up but, in saying that, he brings it up! Still, this should not be the deciding factor in Philemon's decision, because Paul wants him to act out of "his own free will" (v. 14).

3) Remember the principle of reconciliation v. 20

- "Paul picked up on the pun on Onesimus" once more in verse 20. The word translated "joy" (ESV, "benefit") is the same as the word useful in verse 11 (Polhill, 347). "Yes, brother," reaffirms both Paul's confidence Philemon will do the right thing and their warm affectionate relationship (cf. v. 7). Be useful, a blessing to me "in the Lord" and "refresh (imp) my heart (lit. "bowels") in Christ." Of course the way he could refresh Paul's heart was to be reconciled with his slave Onesimus. Paul simply wants Philemon to do "what he is apparently good at doing for everyone else, "refreshing people's heart" (N.T. Wright, *Colossians and Philemon*, TNTC, 1986; p. 189; quoted in Melick, 367).
- By forgiving and reconciling with Onesimus, Philemon would refresh Paul, build unity in the house church he was a part of, and extend to

Onesimus the same kind of grace he had received when he trusted Christ.

- Those who have been reconciled to God thru Christ (2 Cor. 5:20-21) should be “ever ready” to do the same for others who have offended or wounded us. It may initially sting, but there is joy that will surely follow. Perhaps Ephesians 4:32 is never more relevant where Paul writes, “And be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving one another, just as God also forgave you in Christ.” Never forget: we will never forgive anyone as much as God in Christ has already forgiven us.

## II. Express your confidence in the gospel’s work in others vv. 21-22

- These two verses provide valuable lessons in terms of practical theology. They show us how to encourage and motivate (v. 22), and how to extend hospitality (v. 23). Paul encourages Philemon to do the right thing, confident that he will. He also expresses his optimism in the gracious providence of God that he will be released and able to visit Philemon and the church at Colosse.
- Paul has seen evidences of God’s grace in the past in Philemon’s life (v. 7). He is confident that grace will be evident now in how he will treat Onesimus (v. 20-21). He is also quite certain that same work of grace will appear in the



future upon his hoped for arrival (v. 22). Few things are more of a blessing than to have good friends, good brothers and sisters, you can count on.

Knowing they have got your back and will be there for you is truly a precious gift from God.

1) Express your confidence in their obedience and more v. 21

- Once more Philemon expresses his confident certainty in his “dear friend and coworker” (v. 1). “Since I am confident of your obedience” speaks of Paul’s confidence not in Philemon’s obedient response to him, but rather in his obedient response to God and the gospel, what Moo calls “the gospel imperative” (434). Philemon’s obedience ultimately is to Christ not Paul.
- Paul goes on to tell Philemon that he knows “you will do even more than I say.” *The Message* paraphrases it like this, “I know you well enough... You’ll probably go far beyond what I’ve written.” Exactly what he has in mind he does not say. The fact is it does not matter. Some have speculated he hoped Philemon would free Onesimus. Perhaps. Others that Philemon would send him back to Paul to help the apostle in his time of need. I could see that. Regardless, Paul believes Philemon can be counted on. If Philemon surprises us at all, it will be because he exceeds what most people would do in a similar situation. If

any law was at work in Philemon's heart, the apostle Paul was quite confident it was the law of love (Rom. 13:10).

2) Express your confidence in their affection and prayers v. 21

- Sometimes the most spiritual thing we can do is give someone something to drink and eat and a place to stay. And, as a former colleague of mine named Jim Parker playfully says, "What good are friends unless you use them?!" Of course Jim had in mind using friends in a good way.
- Paul is optimistic, something all Christians should be, that he was going to be released from his Roman imprisonment. MacArthur says it well, "Because he knew the case against him was very weak, Paul expected to be released from this first imprisonment (cf. Phil. 2:23-24). He now believes his release to be imminent, perhaps because a date for his hearing before the imperial court had been set. Accordingly, he asks Philemon to prepare me a lodging [*HCSB*, "a guest room] where he can stay when he visits Colossae" (228-29). "Prepare" is the 4<sup>th</sup> and final imperative in Philemon. I believe it takes the actual form of a "polite request" (Rogers and Rogers, *The New Ling. And Exeg. Key to the Greek New Testament*, 515).
- Paul understood that his fate ultimately was in the hands of God. He also believed that in the economy of God's ways, the prayers of his brothers

and sisters made a difference. He says the same thing and at greater length in 2 Corinthians 1:10-11. The compatibility of divine sovereignty and human responsibility was something Paul gladly embraced. Thus he can say to Philemon, “I hope that thru your prayers” (human responsibility) I will be restored [implied “by God,” divine sovereignty] to you. MacArthur says, “Prayers are the nerves that move the muscles of omnipotence” (229). I like that a lot!

### III. Covenant with gospel witnesses you trust

vv. 23-25

- God saves us individually, one at a time. However, He did not save us to be an island unto ourselves. He saved us for community. He saved us for mutual accountability, encouragement, and life. He gave us a spiritual family that is thicker than blood to help us grow in grace as we are more and more conformed to his image (Rom. 8:29-30; 2 Cor. 3:18).
- Paul concludes his letter by calling on human witnesses and divine enablement to assist Philemon as he decides what to do about Onesimus. This is subtle, but addition gentle arm-twisting to be sure. I believe Paul believed Philemon would do the right thing. The fact this book made its way into the canon Scripture would support the idea that he did. Receiving a little help from his friends could not hurt. Perhaps God used them to “seal

the deal” for reconciliation between these men who are now brothers (v. 16).

1) Call on faithful human witnesses v. 23-24

- Paul mentions 5 men in these verses calling them “my coworkers” (*ESV*, “my fellow workers”). He notes one of them, Epaphras, is “my fellow prisoner.” D. Edmon Hiebert points out, “The list is identical to those sending greetings in the epistle to the Colossians except that Jesus Justus is here omitted. This seems to imply that those here named were personally known to Philemon” (124). Garland adds, “Presumably, each of these persons would vouch for Onesimus and concur with Pauls’ request on his behalf” (*NIVAC*, 341).
- A brief description of each man is instructive at this point.
  - 1) *Epaphras* was from Colossae and certainly well known to Philemon (Col. 1:7-8; 4:12-13), but now he is imprisoned alongside Paul in Rome. Paul sees Epaphras as he sees himself, not as a prisoner of the Empire but as a prisoner “Christ Jesus.” He is where he is because he is captive to Christ.
  - 2) Mark is John Mark, author of our 2<sup>nd</sup> Gospel. Formerly, like Onesimus, he had been useless (Acts 15:38), but now he was useful both to Paul and the Lord (see esp. 2 Tim. 4:11).

3) Aristarchus was a close associate of Paul possibly from Macedonia (Acts 19:29; 20:4). He had traveled with Paul to Rome (Acts 27:2). Colossians 4:10 calls him Paul's "fellow prisoner." Tradition says he was martyred in Rome during the persecution under Nero (MacArthur, 230).

4) Demus is honorably mentioned here and in Colossians 4:14. However, 2 Timothy 4:11 informs us that he deserted Paul, "because he loved the present world."

5) Luke is "the dearly loved physician" (Col. 4:14) who penned the 2 volume work Luke-Acts. Some believe he may also have written Hebrews. He traveled with Paul, helped care for him, and became a dear and faithful friend. He was the only person with Paul in the last days of his 2<sup>nd</sup> Roman imprisonment as he waited execution (2 Tim. 4:11).

- These men, then, stand with Paul on behalf of Onesimus. Paul knew they were faithful and trustworthy, and so did Philemon. Their "vote" in favor of Onesimus would have carried significant weight.

## 2) Call for divine enablement v. 25

- Paul ends this letter in the same way he began: with Jesus. In fact he begins and ends using our Savior's full majestic title, "the Lord Jesus

Christ” (v. 3, 25). And, as he began with a prayer following his greeting (v. 1-3), he ends with a prayer of a single sentence of 11 words in our English text. He prays gospel grace which is ours abundantly in our Lord (His deity) Jesus (His humanity) Christ (His office) will be with your spirit.” Murray Harris insightfully notes that the personal pronoun “your” is plural. Thus Paul’s final words might be paraphrased, “May the grace given by the Lord Jesus Christ be with you Philemon, your household, and the whole church, sanctifying the spirit of each of you” (*Exegetical Guide*, 224). Grace flooding their spirits would be key in dealing with the Onesimus offer. Paul, I believed, was confident it would lead Philemon to the right decision.

### Conclusion

In an article entitled, “How Paul Worked to Overcome Slavery” (9-3-09), John Piper provides an excellent summary of the letter to Philemon. And, in the process, he shows us specifically how the gospel works in real life by reconciling brothers and sowing the seeds of the destruction of an evil and sinful institution. He makes eleven observations and then provides an insightful summary. Here is a digest of his thoughts.

“How Paul Worked to Overcome Slavery”

1. Paul draws attention to Philemon's love for all the saints. (1:5). This puts Philemon's relation with Onesimus (now one of the saints) under the banner of love, not just commerce.
2. Paul models for Philemon the superiority of appeals over commands when it comes to relationships governed by love. (1:8-9). This points Philemon to the new dynamics that will hold sway between him and Onesimus. Acting out of freedom from a heart of love is the goal in the relationship.
3. Paul heightens the sense of Onesimus being in the family of God by calling him his child. (1:10). Remember, Philemon, however you deal with him, you are dealing with my child.
4. Paul raises the stakes again by saying that Onesimus has become entwined around his own deep affections. (1:12). "I am deeply bound emotionally to this man." Treat him that way.
5. Paul again emphasizes that he wants to avoid force or coercion in his relationship with Philemon. (1:13-14). This is pointing Philemon how to deal with Onesimus so that he too will act "of his own accord."
6. Paul raises the intensity of the relationship again with the word forever. (1:15). In other words, Onesimus is not coming back into any ordinary, secular relationship. It is forever.

7. Paul says that Philemon's relationship can no longer be the usual master-slave relationship. (1:16). Whether he lets Onesimus go back free to serve Paul, or keeps him in his service, things cannot remain as they were. "No longer as a slave" does not lose its force when Paul adds, "more than a slave."
  8. In the same verse (1:16), Paul refers to Onesimus as Philemon's beloved brother. This is the relationship that takes the place of slave. Onesimus now gets the "holy kiss (1 Thessalonians 5:26) from Philemon and eats at his side at the Lord's Table.
  9. Paul makes clear that Onesimus is with Philemon in the Lord. Onesimus's identity is now the same as Philemon's. He is "in the Lord."
  10. Paul tells Philemon to receive Onesimus the way he would receive Paul. This is perhaps as strong as anything he has said: Philemon, how would you see me, treat me, relate to me, receive me? Treat your former slave and new brother that way.
  11. Paul says to Philemon that he will cover all of Onesimus's debts. Philemon would no doubt be shamed by this, if he had any thoughts of demanding repayment from his new brother...
- "The upshot of all this is that, without explicitly prohibiting slavery, Paul has pointed the church away from slavery because it is an institution which is incompatible with the way the gospel works in people's lives. Whether the slavery



is economic, racial, sexual, mild, or brutal, Paul's way of dealing with Philemon works to undermine the institution across its various manifestations. To walk "in step with the truth of the gospel" (Galatians 2:14) is to walk away from slavery." Good words on which to conclude a wonderful little book in the Bible too often abused, too often neglected. We ignore it at our great loss.