

David Carter / General Adult

Philemon: The Transforming Power of the Gospel / Philemon 1–14

As we look at the world around us, one thing becomes painfully obvious: we live in a world filled with brokenness.

A world marked by injustice, discrimination, violence, greed, and lust. And when we see the brokenness, it grieves our hearts. **We long for change.**

And many people, often out of good motives, try to initiate that change. The thinking goes, “Maybe if we pass more laws... maybe if we change enough policies... maybe if we protest loud enough and wide enough... maybe then we can create the kind of world we want to see.”

But here’s the truth we all eventually run into:

Laws can restrain behaviour, but they cannot transform a human heart.

You can legislate morality, but you cannot legislate love.

You can require certain behaviours, but you cannot create reconciliation.

You can punish wrongdoing, but you cannot produce righteousness.

Every parent understands this.

Every home has rules—clean your room, finish your homework, be home by curfew. And yes, you can enforce those rules. You can discipline your kids when they don’t follow them.

But how do you get your kids to *want* to clean their room?

To see *the value* in doing their homework?

To *embrace* the curfew you set for their good?

That’s the tension. External pressure can shape behaviour—for a while. But it cannot change a heart.

This is why the gospel is the answer.

The good news that Jesus Christ came not just so you could be forgiven, but so that you would be *changed*—transformed from the inside out.

And it's that transforming power that we see in this small letter tucked away near the end of the New Testament: the book of Philemon.

Philemon tells the story of a man, a slave, and an apostle—and the astonishing power of the gospel to transform hearts and bring reconciliation.

The gospel has the power to change a person, to change a relationship, and to change an entire way of seeing the world.

With one short, personal letter, Paul is about to show us how the gospel changes everything — **our relationships, our purpose, and our hearts.**

So, look with me as we begin our short journey through this letter to a man named Philemon—just the first fourteen verses this morning.

Philemon is very different from the rest of Paul's letters.

Most of his writings are addressed to churches or to pastors, to whole communities or to leaders shepherding those communities.

But this is a *personal* letter.

A message from one believer to another.

A letter written to a friend, to a brother in the Lord.

If you want to picture it, imagine we've intercepted a personal email — a private message between two followers of Jesus.

Paul is writing to a man named Philemon because he has come into contact with one of Philemon's slaves, a servant named Onesimus. And over the course of Onesimus spending time with Paul, hearing Paul teach and seeing his example, Paul shares the gospel with him — and Onesimus comes to faith in Christ. He's saved.

And as they talked, something comes to the surface: Onesimus has run away from Philemon.

In fact, as we'll see in the letter, he probably stole from Philemon before he fled. So now Paul is sending him back — no doubt telling him, “Now that you belong to Christ, you must make right the wrongs you’ve done. You need to seek forgiveness. You need to pursue reconciliation.”

We'll get into that more next week.

But here in these opening verses, we get this beautiful picture of how the gospel transforms — not just Onesimus, the man who was once “useless” and is now “useful,” but even the culture around them.

And notice *how* that transformation happens.

Not because Paul staged protests.

Not because he ran for political office.

Not because he campaigned for legal reform.

Transformation was happening simply because Paul preached the gospel — and the people he reached with the gospel reached others with the gospel, who then reached others, and one transformed life after another began to ripple through the Roman world.

Because the gospel has the power to change everything — our relationships, our purpose, and our lives.

And Paul starts his letter by showing us the very first evidence of this transformation:

The gospel has the power to tear down the social and cultural walls that divide us.

BREAKS BARRIERS

The gospel breaks barriers. It breaks barriers, it tears down the walls of society that divide.

Let's see how he shows that in verses 1–3.

[Philemon 1-3](#)

Philemon 1–3 ESV

***Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother,
To Philemon our beloved fellow worker and Apphia our sister and Archippus
our fellow soldier, and the church in your house:
Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.***

The gospel breaks barriers.

Notice how Paul starts this letter: he introduces himself as **a prisoner for Christ Jesus**.

Not “an apostle,” not even “a servant,” but *a prisoner*.

That tells us something about the setting of this letter. Paul is either under house arrest or sitting in an actual prison cell.

And his wording shows us *why* he is there — he is a prisoner **for Christ**, meaning he’s in chains because of his commitment to preach the gospel, because of the conflict that was created, because he refused to bow to a culture trying to silence him.

But that’s not even the most interesting part.

The surprising part is *who* Paul is writing to — a man named Philemon. And Philemon is not a prisoner like Paul. Philemon is a **wealthy, influential man** in his city.

We know this for a couple of reasons.

First, Paul greets Philemon’s wife Apphia and a man named Archippus, who is most likely his son.

Second — and this is the big clue — Paul tells us that a **church meets in Philemon’s home**. We see that at the end of the second verse.

In those days the church didn’t have buildings. Those didn’t appear until the late second to early third century. In the first century churches mostly met in homes — but not just any home. To host a church, your house had to be large enough to hold dozens of people. Only wealthy families could offer that kind of space.

So, Philemon is a man of means. A man of influence. A man who has done well for himself.

And that raises the question:

Why would a wealthy, influential man have a close friendship with a criminal?

Why would a man of status be connected to someone sitting in prison? Why would Paul feel comfortable enough to write him a deeply personal letter, appealing for something significant?

Paul tells us why.

Philemon is a **beloved fellow worker** — a partner in gospel ministry.

He and Paul have likely served together.

Apphia is called “our sister.”

Archippus is a “fellow soldier,” fighting the good fight of the gospel.

Do you see it?

The gospel has brought together two men who otherwise would have had *nothing* to do with one another.

They come from different worlds:

- One is a Gentile, the other a Jew.
- One is wealthy, the other makes a modest living tent-making.
- One is a man of influence; the other is sitting in prison.

This is significant.

Because even today, people usually gather with people who are just like them.

College-educated people tend to gather with other college-educated people.

White-collar workers spend time with white-collar workers.

Blue-collar workers with blue-collar workers.

People cluster by ethnicity, by language, by nationality, by social class.

But the gospel breaks all that apart.

The gospel unites people from every background, every economic level, every culture and ethnicity — people who would have nothing in common except **Christ**.

Strangers become brothers.

Opposites become co-laborers.

Those divided by society become united by the Spirit.

There is literally **no other unifying power in the world** like the gospel of Jesus Christ.

And there's one more clue in this text that tells us Philemon was a wealthy man — **he owned slaves**.

Now, I know that hits our ears in a very uncomfortable way because of our modern understanding of slavery.

So, before we go further, it's helpful to understand a few things about slavery in the Roman world — because it was very different from the slavery we know in more recent history.

Slavery in the Roman world was **not** the race-based, brutal slavery that comes to mind when we think of the horrific atrocities of more recent centuries. It operated very differently.

- It was not based on ethnicity or skin colour. People became slaves for many reasons — economic hardship, debt, war, or being born into a slave household.
- Many slaves were highly educated. Some served as doctors, teachers, accountants, musicians, or administrators.
- In many cases, slaves lived better than poor free citizens, who often had no reliable food, shelter, or work.
- Slaves could own property, earn wages, and even buy their freedom. Many masters freed faithful slaves in their wills.

Now hear me clearly: **None of that makes slavery right.**

There is **never** a justification for one human being owning another.

Roman slavery was still a **fallen system**.

- Slaves were not considered full legal persons.
- Abuse existed.
- Families could be separated.
- And runaway slaves — like Onesimus — were often severely punished.

So, the Bible is **not** endorsing slavery. Understand that Paul is in no position to change the legal status of slaves, he is prisoner, not a politician.

What the Bible does — and especially what Paul does in this letter — is introduce a **gospel truth that undermines slavery at its very foundation**.

Look at verse 16:

Paul says I'm sending him back "no longer as a bondservant but more than a bondservant, as a beloved brother..."

Paul sends Onesimus back to Philemon **not as property**, but as a **beloved brother**.

In Christ, social categories collapse.

Identity is redefined.

Human worth is redefined.

And relationships are transformed.

And that single gospel truth didn't stay in the first century.

It became the driving force behind the abolition of slavery centuries later.

This gospel vision is exactly what fueled **William Wilberforce**, the British politician who spent more than 40 years fighting the slave trade.

After coming to Christ in his twenties, he wrote in his journal:

“God Almighty has set before me two great objects: the abolition of the slave trade and the reformation of society.”

His conviction that every person is made equal in Christ drove him to challenge one of the most powerful and entrenched institutions of his day — not because of politics, but because of the gospel. This truth taught here, how can a brother own another brother?

The same gospel that united Paul and Philemon...
the same gospel that transformed Onesimus...
is the gospel that inspired Wilberforce to stand against slavery centuries later.
The gospel breaks barriers.

This is why the gospel has the power to transform, to change everything — because it tears down the walls and breaks the barriers our culture and society build up.

And once the gospel breaks those barriers, it doesn't stop there — it sends us out on mission.

SENDS US OUT ON MISSION

The gospel sends us out on mission.

Look with me at verses 4-7

[Philemon 4-7](#)

Philemon 4-7 ESV

I thank my God always when I remember you in my prayers, because I hear of your love and of the faith that you have toward the Lord Jesus and for all the saints, 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. For I have derived much joy and comfort from your love, my brother, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you.

Philemon and his family had been transformed by the gospel too — but what's so clear about their example is this: their faith in Jesus isn't just about *them*. They recognize that Jesus didn't just want to change their hearts; He wanted to **use** them to reach others.

And what's amazing is it's not just Philemon living on mission. His wife Apphia is involved. Archippus — likely their son — is called a “fellow soldier,” not because he serves in the Roman army, but because he is **on mission for Jesus Christ**.

We know this family is already living on mission because they have opened up their home. They are using one of the most precious resources God has entrusted to them — their house — for the furtherance of the gospel.

Their home is a place where people gather for worship, where they hear the Word taught, where they come to faith and grow in that faith. And make no mistake: this comes at a cost. Hospitality always does.

But it's not just their home.

Look at verses 5 and 6. Paul says he consistently thanks God because he hears of their **love and faith** toward Jesus and toward all the saints. And he prays that *the sharing of their faith* — literally *their gospel partnership* — would become even more effective.

Do you see it?

This is a family living on mission.

They are sharing their faith — yes, with their words, telling others about Jesus and inviting people into their home. But they are also sharing their faith by sharing their **resources**, the wealth and means; influence that God has given them.

We even sense that they supported Paul's ministry financially — which is why he says he has received “much joy and comfort” from their love.

This is what the gospel does in the lives of people who truly come to Christ — it sends us out on mission.

It compels us to use what the Lord has given us to further the gospel, to build the Kingdom, and to encourage the saints.

This is why part of our discipleship path here at BBC emphasizes giving — giving our **time, our talent, and our treasure** — because this is what the gospel calls us to do. Gospel transformation isn't only about what God does *in* us; it's about what God wants to do *through* us.

And this is how cultures are changed.

This is how societies are impacted — *from the inside out*. Not by passing more laws, but by reaching people with the gospel, one person at a time, one transformed life after another, until eventually even the culture around them begins to feel the ripple effects.

We get this incredible picture in the New Testament of how the early church grew: through people gathering in homes. People like Philemon and Apphia opening their doors so that neighbours, friends, and strangers could hear the gospel, worship Jesus, and be discipled.

There is power in hospitality — in gathering around the Word, in prayer, sharing food, sharing life, building community.

This is why our Growth Groups are such an important part of what we do here at BBC. It's why we continue to encourage you to get involved in one.

Real discipleship and real community happen when people meet in homes. It's what we see all throughout the New Testament.

And I've seen this firsthand in other parts of the world.

In places where the soil is hard and the culture is hostile; churches are growing through home gatherings.

In Lebanon, among the Druze people — migrants from the Syrian war, most from Islamic backgrounds — the gospel is spreading in homes. What started with 20 believers became 60... and now hundreds. All because people opened their homes, invited friends and neighbours in, and shared the gospel.

It's part of the vision of our ethnic home churches.

Pastor Nestor and I began envisioning our own home gatherings for different ethnic groups right here — Nepali, Hispanic, Filipino, South Asian.

Because thousands of people are moving into our city from different countries, and many have no context for Canadian culture or the Canadian church. They might not walk through our church doors — but they would gladly walk into the home of someone who shares their background, language, and food.

That's the vision. Reaching the nations in our city through home churches.

This is how the church has grown for centuries — ordinary believers living on mission, using what God has given them, opening their homes, inviting people in, and sharing Jesus.

Let me ask you:

How are you living on mission for Jesus today? What does it look like for you to use what the Lord has given you to live on mission for him?

“Philemon’s family shows us what it looks like when the gospel gets hold of a household and sends them on mission.

But Paul also wants Philemon to see something else — the gospel doesn’t just transform our purpose; it transforms our hearts.

TRANSFORMS HEARTS AND LIVES

Look with me now at verses 8–14.

The gospel transforms our hearts and lives.

Philemon 8–9 ESV

Accordingly, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do what is required, yet for love's sake I prefer to appeal to you—I, Paul, an old man and now a prisoner also for Christ Jesus—

Notice what Paul says at the beginning of verse 8:

“Though I am bold enough in Christ to command you...”

Let's stop there.

Think back to what we said earlier: Paul is a *prisoner*. Philemon is a *wealthy, influential man*. Under normal circumstances, what right would Paul have to command anything of Philemon? And why in the world would Philemon feel obligated to obey?

The answer is found in that little phrase: **“in Christ.”**

Paul is saying, “I have the authority *in Christ* to command you.” In other words,

Philemon recognizes Paul's **apostolic authority** — that when Paul gives a command rooted in Scripture, it carries the very weight of Christ Himself.

The point is not that Philemon submits to Paul as a man.

The point is that Philemon has **submitted his life to Christ**.

That's the essence of transformation.

When you place your faith in Jesus, you don't just receive His forgiveness — you embrace His authority. You no longer want to live for your own will alone; your desire becomes to live under the will and leadership of Christ.

Now, Paul *could* command Philemon to do what Christ requires — namely, to pursue reconciliation with Onesimus. But notice something important: *motivation matters*. Paul says, “I could command you, but I prefer to appeal to you in love.”

Why?

Because Christ is not interested in mere behaviour modification.

He isn't after reluctant, forced obedience.
He wants **heart-level**, love-driven obedience.

Paul is essentially saying, "Philemon, I don't want you to do the right thing just because I told you to. I want you to do the right thing because the love of Christ is transforming your heart."

This is where real transformation happens.
Not when we're pressured from the outside, but when Christ changes us from the inside — our desires, our motivations, our loves.

This is exactly what transformation looks like.
Christ isn't just trying to modify our behaviour downstream — He's trying to change the *source* upstream.

I heard a preacher tell a story about a town that was built along a beautiful river. One day, garbage started floating downstream — at first a little, then more, and more, until the river was full of trash.

So, the townspeople got to work. They organized cleanup crews. They built nets. They skimmed garbage off the surface. They tried to keep the mess from reaching their homes.

But no matter how hard they worked, the trash kept coming.
They were treating the symptoms downstream, but the problem never stopped.

Finally, someone said, "Why don't we go *upstream* and see where all this is coming from?"

And sure enough, a few miles upriver they found the real problem — a dumping site that was feeding garbage into the river every single day.
They didn't need more downstream cleanup crews.
They needed to address the *source*.

That's the difference between **behaviour modification** and **heart transformation**.

You can clean up the behaviour downstream, but unless Christ changes the heart upstream, nothing will truly change.

And that's what Paul is appealing to in Philemon.

Not just that he *do* the right thing — but that he *want* to do the right thing.

Not just outward obedience — but inward transformation.

Not just the action — but the heart behind the action.

Because the gospel doesn't simply give us new habits...

it gives us a new heart.

Philemon knows exactly what that transformation looks like, because he has experienced it in his own life.

He went from being a man who used his wealth, his resources, and his home for himself — for his own comfort and benefit — to a man who uses everything God has given him to further the Kingdom and encourage the saints.

He went from living according to his own will and his own desires...

to living under the authority and leadership of Christ.

He went from a man who did not know God, love God, or serve God...

to a man who now walks with God, loves God, and serves Him — not just in words, but through sacrificial actions.

He went from being dead in his trespasses and sins...

to being **alive in Christ.**

Philemon knows what transformation looks like.

He knows the impact Christ can have on a person's life.

And it's that very transformation — his own transformed heart — that Paul now calls him to remember as he turns his attention to someone else who has also been changed...**his former slave, Onesimus.**

Let's keep reading there in verses 10-12

Philemon 10–12 ESV

I appeal to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I became in my imprisonment. (Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful to you and to me.) I am sending him back to you, sending my very heart.

Paul wants Philemon to see that there is **another man** whose life has been transformed — his former slave, Onesimus.

A change has taken place in him. Paul says, “*Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful to you and to me.*”

What’s interesting is that the name *Onesimus* literally means “**useful.**”

Paul is actually playing with his name a bit.

He’s saying, “Philemon, I know he didn’t live up to his name before — he wasn’t ‘useful’ in any sense — but now, because of the gospel, he truly is what his name says he is.”

What happened?

What changed him?

What made the difference?

Paul gives us the clue in verse 10:

“I appeal to you for my child, whose father I became...”

Paul intentionally uses **family language** — words that signal belonging, relationship, and spiritual connection. He’s not being subtle. He is telling Philemon that Onesimus has become part of the **family of God**.

Paul often refers to people he has led to the Lord and discipled as his “children,” and he calls himself their “spiritual father.” That’s what he’s doing here.

Somewhere, somehow, in the providence of God, Onesimus crossed paths with Paul — maybe in prison, maybe through the network of believers ministering to Paul — and Paul shares the gospel with him.

And Onesimus believes.
He surrenders.
He gives his life to Christ.

Praise God — he has become part of Christ's family!

And how do we know he truly believed?
Because **a change has taken place.**
He is no longer useless — he is useful to the Lord.

We can assume that as Onesimus came to faith he confessed his sins to Paul. He likely admitted his rebellion, his dishonesty, his disobedience — perhaps even that he had stolen from Philemon before fleeing.

It's why Paul says in verse 18, *"If he owes you anything, charge it to my account."*

This brother has changed.

He recognizes his sin.

He admits he was wrong.

He has repented.

And we know he's repentant because he is now willing to go back — to return to the very man he wronged — and seek forgiveness and reconciliation.

He was useless...

but now, in Christ, he is useful.

In fact, Paul says something remarkable in verse 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."

Paul is saying, "Philemon, this man has become so faithful, so dependable, so transformed, that honestly? I'd keep him with me if I could. He has become a partner in the gospel."

Onesimus is a new creation in Christ.

The old Onesimus — the rebellious, dishonest runaway — is gone.

A new Onesimus has come.

A man forgiven.

A man made new.

A man who belongs to Jesus.

A man whose heart, identity, and destiny have been completely transformed by the power of the gospel.

He isn't returning to Philemon as the same man who left.

He is returning as a **brother**, as a **servant of Christ**, as a **new creation**.

This is the transforming power of the gospel.

It's the gospel that reached and transformed Philemon and his whole household.

It's the gospel that changed the life of Onesimus.

And it's that same power that can transform **your** life today.

I was talking to a couple in our church this week who have been married for many years, and they gave me permission to share their story.

For years, the wife prayed that her husband would come to Christ. In fact, the whole church was praying for him. Every Sunday she would come to worship... and he would stay home.

One night, as he sat in his chair drinking his sherry, he happened to hear a preacher on TV calling people to surrender their lives to Christ. And right there in his living room, he did. He surrendered.

And immediately, he told me, something changed.

He dumped out his drink.

Then he went one step further, in the basement he had a large bar filled with liquor, he poured out every bottle in his bar.

But he didn't stop there.

He tore down the entire bar he had built... and in its place he built a library.

A wall of Christian books.

The bar where he used to run from God became the place where he grew in Christ.

A transformation had taken place. Not behaviour modification. Not self-improvement. A new heart. A new creation. A life changed by the power of the gospel.

Let me ask you: **Do you know Jesus?**

Has anyone ever shared the good news of Christ with you the way Paul shared it with Onesimus?

Has anyone told you that God loves you — that He created you to live in relationship with Him?

The problem, of course, is our sin.

Our moral failings, our rebellion, our patterns of selfishness — all of it creates a wedge between us and God. A separation we could never bridge on our own.

But God so loved the world that He sent His Son.

Jesus came and lived the perfect life that we could never live.

He took that perfect life and offered it up on a cross — dying in the place of sinners like you and me, taking upon Himself the punishment we deserved.

His life for yours.

His righteousness for your sin.

His death so you could live.

And three days later, God raised Him from the dead — proving His victory over sin, death, and hell.

Here's the promise of the gospel:

If you put your faith — your trust, your reliance — in Jesus and His finished work, **His righteousness is credited to you.**

You are forgiven.

Redeemed.

Adopted into the family of God.

But the gospel is not only about forgiveness.

It's about **newness of life**.

God puts His Spirit within you.

You become a new creation — the old has passed away, behold, the new has come.

You receive a new identity, a new relationship, a new purpose, a new heart.

That's exactly what Onesimus experienced.

He became a new creation.

The old Onesimus — the useless servant, the thief, the liar, the runaway — that man is gone.

And in his place stands a child of God, a forgiven brother in Christ, redeemed, restored, and useful in the hands of God.

And that same transforming power of the gospel is available to **all who believe**.

[**Romans 1:16**](#) says,

“For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes...”

That's how the world changes.

One transformed life at a time.

That's how cultures are influenced. That's how darkness is pushed back — one heart made new in Jesus Christ.

Because the gospel has the power to truly transform —

not just habits,

not just actions,

not just outward behaviour,

but **hearts, minds, and lives**.

The gospel changes everything — our relationships, our purpose, and our hearts.

It tears down the barriers this world tries to build, and it unites people as one body in Christ.

It sends God's people out on mission — not to focus only on their own personal transformation, but to become agents of grace, using everything God has given us to reach others for His Kingdom.

And it transforms us at the deepest level —
not surface change,
not behaviour management,
but real heart change.

This is the power of the gospel.

This is the hope offered to you today.

Church, this is the gospel we believe and the gospel we proclaim.

The same gospel that changed Philemon, Onesimus, and Paul is the gospel that is changing us.

So let's go from here as people transformed by grace — breaking barriers, living on mission, and allowing Christ to shape every part of our lives.

May we be a church marked by transformed hearts and transformed lives, so that through us, others may come to know the transforming power of the gospel.