

## **Weekly Study of Sunday's Message.** **Sunday July 11, 2021. "The Little Three: Philemon"**

### **I Intro.**

Welcome to the weekly devotional that gives you some specific things to work through from the message this Sunday. Whether you were able to participate in this service or not, this devotion is free-standing and you can still use it to help you dig deeper into your own spiritual walk. We're roughly halfway through 2021 and fully committed to gathering in person. A growing group of familiar and new faces join us each Sunday. Our children's and youth areas have been fully open also and are seeing a good response. We're so encouraged with your love and presence when you gather with us. If you're still joining us online, we love and so appreciate your presence also. We are 100% committed to our virtual attenders. We still are your church family, and if there is ANYTHING you need, prayer, ideas or suggestions, please pass them our way. We know the future is still uncertain, but we are committed to making our virtual congregation as central to NCC as our in person group.

### **II Sunday.**

I need to first say we began a really unusual three part series just for the month of July. As you can see, it's called; "***The Little Three***". It's about the three of the shortest letters in the New Testament. The reason we chose this series was these letters are almost never preached from because they're very specifically addressed, and for the most part deal with only one issue. Think about it as a phone call to the person watching your dog while you're away giving them some very basic instructions. It doesn't have much universal application in it, but it does say something about the person who wrote it, and some values they hold close.

The first book/letter, (and we say letter because it was an actual correspondence from Paul to his friend Philemon about a very particular matter), is called Philemon. It's only one chapter, and 25 verses. It's an easy read, about a particularly tough topic. So, read it and we'll dig into it.

**Since there is no specific theme for this message, did anything jump out to you?**

**Did you have any questions or issues that you didn't know how to interpret?**

Philemon has always been a tough book for theologians over the years. Simply because of the fact it deals with slavery, and Paul never comes out and openly condemns slavery. And we admit this is a very difficult issue to deal with. However, this isn't the only difficult practice or situation we see in scripture. There are literally dozens of stories and accounts in scripture that are difficult to wrap our minds around. Israelites practicing genocide at the request of God. The story of Abraham being told to kill his son Isaac. David in his psalms wishing his enemies to have their heads bashed in and their teeth knocked out. The answer to dealing with these kinds of very uncomfortable passages in scripture is to understand the context. We look back at those periods of times through a very enlightened and evolved worldview. The thought of those kinds of things just doesn't fit our understanding of who we see Jesus to be. We see everyone as equal, we should show no preferences, as just self-evident. And the reason we believe and hold onto those teachings is

because of Jesus. There is this continual evolving of our theology, understanding of God, and practicing of our faith all through scripture. You can see experiencing God, and how faith is lived out change from the earlier passages in the Old Testament, to the practice of our understanding of God in the New Testament. This is how we understand Philemon. And you will see some movement from the context of that day, around the idea of slavery despite the fact Paul didn't outright condemn it. So, let's get real honest here.

### **Are there parts of scripture you struggle with? Why? And, how have you handled it?**

We basically approached this passage with two goals.

#### **1. Help us reassess how we read and understand scripture.**

This is such an essential practice to help us understand and apply scripture in a much more powerful and helpful way. We tend to read scripture as mostly a historical event, and get caught up in the surface details of the story. That's an important process in helping us frame what happened, but until we dig deeper we really have very little to help us understand how to apply it to our lives. The scripture becomes a storybook and not a guide to how to live. So, we have to ask these questions.

#### **How did people understand it when it was written?**

This is a context question. What was the environment like when it was written and how would the recipients and listeners have heard it?

#### **What is the surface understanding?**

Just reading the passage at face value. This is simply looking at the surface account of what happened. This is important, but it's not getting all you can out of the passage. In this story Paul was returning a piece of property, and we could just stop there and miss greater truths.

#### **What are the deeper truths contained in it?**

All scripture must be interpreted in layers. There is a surface, what happened, reading. And then there is a need to read deeper asking, **what truths are contained in this passage?**

Basically, Paul is not dismantling the economic systems of injustice, (which can and still is an issue to have a conversation around), but he is speaking against it in our personal behavior. A real place and understanding for how to interpret the truths in scripture and not just try to figure out the surface details.

### **III Challenge.**

Our second goal is taking that third question and looking for truths we can apply to our lives.

#### **2. What can this passage say to us today?**

Paul is saying Onesimus is now free. Spiritually. Literally. Which seems to be the deeper, greater truth under the surface of the story. Which leads to another truth about interpreting scripture. Recognizing the movement of God in scripture is continually towards freedom. This is an overarching theme. **Spiritually and intellectually maturing people move into a deeper and maturing understanding and relationship with God.** Doing this you will move from surface literal only interpretation, to a more contextually based interpretation of what deeper truths this passage is trying to teach me. This is where scripture really comes alive.