

Through the Bible at 30,000 Feet

Philemon | *This Will Change Your Life*

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CONTEXT

Today, we are looking at **the final letter** from the apostle Paul that God has preserved for us in His Word. In actuality, it's more like a postcard than a letter (*just one chapter, 25 verses*).¹

It's known as one of the “**Prison Letters**” because Paul wrote it while he was in prison in Rome.²

Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus...

~ *Philemon 1*

Though he is imprisoned *in* Rome, he doesn't see himself as a prisoner *of* Rome.

- Paul believed that God was **sovereign over everything** that happened in his life.
 - So, if he was imprisoned in Rome, it was because *God intended for him to be there*.
 - If he was released from prison, it was because *God intended for him to be released*.
 - His life belonged to Jesus. And he was happy for Jesus to do whatever He wanted to do with Paul's life.
- And so, he begins his letter by clarifying **who has ultimate control** over his life.

PHILEMON

He is primarily writing this little letter to a man named Philemon.

What do we know about **Philemon**?

- A close friend of Paul (**1**)
- A fellow minister of the Gospel (**1**)
- Part of a local church (**2**)
- His name means “*affectionate*” in Greek, and, from all we know about Philemon, he appears to have lived up to his name (**5–7**)
- He was an affluent man who had the financial means of having people work for him (**12**), and his home was spacious enough for him to create a guest room for Paul (**22**)
- He prayed regularly for Paul (**22**)

REASON FOR THE LETTER

What is the reason for this letter from Paul?

- Paul is writing to talk about a runaway slave named **Onesimus**.
- Apparently, Onesimus had worked for Philemon as a slave.

¹ With 335 words in the original Greek, Philemon is the third shortest book in the entire Bible (**3 John** has 219 words & **2 John** has 245 words).

² The four “Prison Epistles” are Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon.

Right away, this raises some questions: like, how can a person be a Christian and have slaves?
Here is how I think we should answer this question when it come to Philemon...

1. **Cultural Normalcy.** At this point and time in human history, having slaves was extremely common and culturally acceptable practice. Every culture and every people group through the history of the world had practiced slaveholding (including the Israelites). This doesn't mean it was okay. It just means that Philemon probably wouldn't have had any concept that slavery is against the heart of God.
2. **Christianity is still brand new.** The church is still getting started. Everybody (including Philemon) is still learning how the gospel of Jesus shapes cultures and changes relationships.
3. **Philemon's character.** Given everything Paul says about Philemon's character, it seems as though he treated the people around him with love, and so we don't have any reason to believe that Philemon was abusive to Onesimus.

ONESIMUS

What do we know about **Onesimus**?

- He had worked for Philemon as a slave (**11–12**).
- But he was “unprofitable” in his work (**11**).³
- Eventually, he ran away (**12, 15**).
- And he may have even stolen something from Philemon before he left (**18**).
- Somehow, Onesimus winds up running into Paul in prison, and he gets saved (**10**)!
- There in prison, Onesimus becomes a source of great encouragement to Paul (**13**).
- But the day came when Paul decided that Onesimus needed to return to Philemon and make things right (**12–14**).
- So, Paul wrote a letter to Philemon that Onesimus was to give to him upon his return (**21**).
- And in this letter, Paul appeals to Philemon to receive Onesimus, not as a slave, but as a brother in Jesus Christ.

As I recite the letter to you, listen for all the phrases that sound like the gospel...

RECITE PHILEMON

I want to spend our time in this book by looking at **three ways the Gospel of Jesus changes lives**.

1. **It changes our identity:** the gospel gives us a new identity: “**once...but now**” (**11**).

In verse 11, we read that Onesimus was “once” one way, “but now” he is completely different.⁴

What is that? *That's the language of identity change.*

Because of the gospel, Onesimus isn't who he once was.

³ It is not certain what Paul means by “**unprofitable**”. Perhaps, Onesimus was *lazy* or *dishonest* or *argumentative*...?

⁴ “*I was one way, and now I'm completely different*” (**The Chosen**).

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation;
Old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new.⁵

~ 2 Corinthians 5:17

How could this happen?
Because...

For He [*God the Father*] made Him [*God the Son*] who knew no sin to be sin for us,
that we might become the righteousness of God in Him [*Jesus Christ*].

~ 2 Corinthians 5:21

That's what happens with the Gospel of Jesus.

- The Gospel of Jesus actually **changes who you are**.
- The Gospel of Jesus **rewrites your story**.⁶
- It takes "**once**" and makes it a "**but now**".

We sing of this reality all the time in our worship gatherings.

We sing about who we were before our lives were changed forever by the gospel of Jesus.

We sing...

"I **once** was lost in darkest night... [but now] Hallelujah, all I have is Christ."⁷

"I **once** was lost but now am found; was blind, **but now** I see."⁸

"**Not the same**, I am **changed**. Redeemed⁹ by the blood of the Lamb."¹⁰

Paul introduced Onesimus to the good news of Jesus, and it changed his identity!

This man who was **once** an *unprofitable, runaway slave* was **now** a *beloved brother*.

⁵ Have you ever seen a movie where somebody tries to change their identity? Maybe they dye their hair, put in colored contact lenses, get a fake ID (passport, license). But we know that no matter how drastically they change their appearance or what kind of documentation they get... in reality, they are still the same person. They've changed their appearance & their papers, but they're still the same person.

That's not what happens with the Gospel of Jesus. The Gospel of Jesus actually **changes who you are**. The Gospel of Jesus **rewrites your story**. It takes "**once**" and makes it a "**but now**".

⁶ The day Elizabeth and I **adopted** our three oldest boys, their identity changed & their story was rewritten. Their family name was officially changed to Knoop. And their birth story was rewritten on their birth certificate (which now says that they were all born to Elizabeth Knoop)! If somebody were to say that they weren't really & truly a Knoop, they could respond by saying, "*I certainly am. The judge declared it, and the government sealed it. Look, here are my papers.*" In the same way, if somebody were to say that I am not truly a child of God, I could respond by saying, "*I certainly am. My Savior did all the work and paid all the fees. The Judge declared it. The Spirit sealed it. Look, here is the gospel!*"

⁷ All I Have is Christ.

⁸ Amazing Grace

⁹ **Philemon 18**, "*Put that on my account.*" **Like the day my dad paid my cell phone bill with his own money.** 😊

¹⁰ Redeemed by the Blood of the Lamb

Illustration

When I was still a young man, living with my parents, a family in the area began attending our church (a mom & her two young children). The father **was** a drunk, vulgar, and abusive man who wanted nothing to do with the church. But the Gospel had grabbed ahold of the mom and her two children, and so they continued to get involved in the life of the church: spending time in people's homes, participating in the Bible studies and the children's ministries. In the midst of a tough home life, the gospel had given them hope.

Well, the day came when the husband & father called my dad and asked to meet him. At that evening, on the steps of the church building, the gospel penetrated through this man's heart, and he became a new person. His character didn't transform overnight, but from that moment on – he was no longer the same. Over the next year, **he became** a husband who loved & honored his wife. He became a father who cherished and protected his children. He became a man who found more pleasure in Jesus than he had ever experienced in a bottle. His language changed. He became part of the local church. He sang! He had a heart for missions, and his wife eventually became the mission's coordinator of the church.

As a result of years of alcoholic abuse, he died just one year later. But, through the life-changing power of the gospel, he left a legacy of joy behind for his wife and children.

The gospel did that.¹¹

This is what the gospel of Jesus does:

- It takes sinners and makes us saints.¹²
- It takes outsiders and makes us children of God.¹³
- It takes enemies of God and makes us God's beloved.¹⁴
- It takes spiritually dead people and breathes life into their souls.¹⁵
- It takes those who last and makes them first.¹⁶
- It takes a leper and makes him clean.¹⁷
- It takes the blind and gives him sight.¹⁸

The Gospel changes your identity.¹⁹

- You are no longer "*the leper*". You are no longer "*the blind*" ...
- You are no longer "*the outcast*", "*the orphan*", "*the slave*" ...

You are a child of God and nothing less! **The gospel did that!**

¹¹ Romans 1:16.

¹² 1 Cor 1:2, "To the church of God...to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, **called to be saints**..."

¹³ 1 John 3:1, "Behold what manner of love the Father has bestowed on us, that we should be **called children of God!**"

¹⁴ Rom 5:10, "...when **we were enemies, we were reconciled to God** through the death of His Son..."

¹⁵ Eph 2:5, "even when **we were dead** in trespasses, [Jesus] **made us alive** together with Christ..."

¹⁶ Matt 20:16, "So the last will be first, and the first last..."

¹⁷ Mark 1:41-42, "...As soon as He had spoken, immediately **the leprosy left him, and he was cleansed.**"

¹⁸ John 9:6-7, "...He anointed the eyes of **the blind man**... [and he] **came back seeing.**"

¹⁹ 2 Cor 5:17. Just as an orphan's **birth certificate** is changed when they are adopted into a family.

2. **It transforms our relationships**

Paul tells Philemon that he is sending back Onesimus, but when Onesimus, Philemon must not receive him as an **unprofitable slave**, but as a **beloved brother**.

Not only is it wrong for Philemon to treat Onesimus as a slave because they are both made in the image of God, but Paul makes clear that their relationship must also change because Onesimus is now Philemon's brother in Christ. This relationship transformation is the gospel work of Jesus.

Jesus told His followers...

**No longer do I call you servants...
But I have called you friends...
~ John 15:15**

This is what the gospel of Jesus does: *it transforms relationships*.²⁰

Q. The question is: **how** does the gospel of Jesus transform our relationships?

A. The gospel transforms our relationships by taking everything that we are looking for in our horizontal relationships and giving it to us in Christ.

For example:

- Why do kids act out in school?
 - *Sometimes, it's because they are starved for attention.*
- Why does a husband cheat on his wife?
 - *Sometimes, it's because he is starved for affection.*

²⁰ Take marriage as **an example**. The reason that drunken, vulgar, abusive man became a husband who loved his wife is because of the gospel.

Q. Why do husbands love their wives?

A. Because they have seen (in the gospel) how Christ Jesus loves His bride, the church.

Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and *gave* Himself for her, that He might *sanctify* and *cleanse* her with the *washing* of water by the word, that He might present her to Himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that she should be holy and without blemish. **So**, husbands ought to love their own wives as their own bodies; he who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, **just as the Lord** does the church (*Ephesians 5:25–29*).

The Christian husband loves his wife because his heart has been transformed by the good news of how radically and completely he has been loved by Jesus.

- Men, when you see how Jesus loves His bride; it changes how you love yours.
- Women, when you see how the bride of Christ is called to honor Him and to submit to Him; it changes how you honor your own husband and how you submit to him.

But this relationship transformation goes even deeper than that.

- Why does a young girl get involved with a young man who is not kind to her?
 - *Sometimes, it's because she is starved for **acceptance**.*
- Why does a mom yell at his children?
 - *Sometimes, it's because she is starved for **appreciation**.*
- Why does a dad become a workaholic?
 - *Sometimes, it's because he is desperate to feel **valued**.*
- Why does a boss treat his employees poorly?
 - *Sometimes, it's because he is desperate to feel **important**.*

Sometimes, we are so hungry for attention, affection, acceptance, appreciation, feeling valued or important...that we end up abusing our relationships in order to get what we so desperately want.

But the good news in the gospel is that we already have all of these things in Jesus.

- You are **accepted** by God.²¹
- You are **loved** by God.²²
- You are **precious** in His eyes.²³
- You have all of God's **attention**.²⁴
- You are **seen**.²⁵ You are **known**. You are **enough**...because Jesus is enough.

Everything you and I long for in a relationship, we already have in Christ – which means we are free to love & to serve & to give without needing to get anything in return.

- We are free to love those who don't love us back.
- We are free to serve those who don't appreciate our service.
- We are free to give of ourselves to those who only take.
- We are free to forgive those who refuse to even acknowledge their wrongdoing

It frees Onesimus to go back to Philemon with humility and boldness,²⁶ and it frees Philemon to forgive Onesimus and to receive him no longer as a slave but as a beloved brother.

The gospel does that!

CONCLUSION

So, when the world **looks** at NC (at our marriages, our relationships, our hospitality, our work ethic, our evangelism, the way we serve one another) ... when the world **listens** to NC (the way we talk to one another, the way we talk about others, the way we sing together, the way we pray together) ... may it be the undeniable evidence of the power of the gospel at work in our lives – that we are not who we once were. May they see our good works (our relationships, our freedom, our joy), and may what they see draw them into the gospel of Jesus and into the love of the Father.

²¹ Eph 1:6.

²² Jer 31:3; John 3:16; 1 John 3:1.

²³ Deut 14:2; Isa 43:4; Zech 2:8; 1 Pet 2:9.

²⁴ Psalm 121:8; Gen 28:15; Zeph 3:17; Matt 6:4.

²⁵ Gen 16:13.

²⁶ There is a grace to face our past: “*I am sending him back*” (**Philem 12**).

EXTRA

3. **It compels joyful obedience:** “*knowing that you will do even more than I say*” (21).

Paul had the apostolic authority to command Philemon to receive Onesimus as a brother and not as a slave. It would have been good and right for Paul to make a command like this, but he doesn't. Instead, he fully expects Philemon to do this **voluntarily** (14) because that's what the gospel does: it compels our obedience with joy.

Q. Why?

A. Because our rebellious hearts have been rescued out of darkness and have been brought into the Kingdom of God where we delight to do His will.²⁷

“[There is a King seated among us.](#)”

- The gospel makes us part of His kingdom.²⁸
 - Here, in this kingdom, it is our highest honor to do what He calls us to do.
 - This applies to:
 - honoring our parents
 - honoring the governing authorities, which means...
 - paying our taxes
 - driving the speed limit
 - **eyes:** not gazing at another person with lust
 - **heart:** loving our spouse, our children, our neighbors
 - **mouth:** not gossiping
 - regularly gathering with your local church family
 - Doing what God calls us to do applies to **every part** of our life!

But the gospel turns it from being a **JOB** into being our **JOY**.

The **psalmist** said, “*I delight to do Your will, O my God, and Your law is within my heart*” (40:8). If you want to know what this joyful obedience looks like, then turn your eyes upon Jesus!

He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death,
even the death of the cross.²⁹

~ *Philippians 2:8*

Looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith,
Who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross,
Despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

~ *Hebrews 12:2*

²⁷ Psalm 40:8; John 14:15.

²⁸ Rom 1:16.

²⁹ See also Hebrews 5:8.