



A Whole New Relational Activity

Philemon 8-16

Grace Church | 5.1.22

One of my favorite descriptions of hospitality, “welcome” and “receiving” is found in Tolkien’s *The Hobbit*. In the story, Bilbo and the dwarves have already encountered quite a bit of trouble on their adventure to the Lonely Mountain, but not yet have they crossed into the great wilderness of the Misty Mountains. Before they can do that, they need rest. So they come to Rivendell, the house of Elrond, which is called “The Last Homely House East of the Sea”.

His house was perfect, whether you liked food, or sleep, or work, or story-telling, or singing, or just sitting and thinking best, or a pleasant mixture of them all. Evil things did not come into that valley... All of them, the ponies as well, grew refreshed and strong in a few days there. Their clothes were mended as well as their bruises, their tempers and their hopes.¹

A place where everything can be mended: that is a true home, a place of welcome. I always find it very telling that Jesus, in his time of ministry, told us that while “foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests”, he himself had “no place to lay his head” (Mat 8:20). The comment comes as a scribe gives lip service to Jesus, saying “I will follow you wherever you go.” But will he really follow him into homelessness? What is striking about Jesus’ lack of “home” is that in Scripture, the presence of God in heaven is described as “home”. So the idea is: Jesus left his heavenly home with the Father to live a life of homelessness. He was unwelcome in the world, without a homely house. Why? Well, very simply: so that through him we could find our way back home. By faith in Jesus, we can have not only our bodies mended, but also our tempers and hopes. He became unwelcome to welcome us to the true and better “Last Homely House”, which is God’s house.

This understanding of Jesus’ welcome gives all the more meaning to a text like Roman 15:7 - “Welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.” Welcome one another, Paul says, by being more than willing to be made low for the sake of the comfort of others. Be willing to not have a place to lay your head, so that your church family can have a soft place for theirs. It also gives more meaning to the appeal that sits at the very heart of Philemon, which we find in **verse 17**. Paul is standing in the gap for Onesimus, as Christ stands in the gap for us, and says: “my welcome is his welcome”. Jesus stands before God and says to all there: my welcome is your welcome.

¹ J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Hobbit*



Last week in Philemon, we saw that God was building a whole new relational reality—it's the reality of family love, the reality of the church. This week, we will see that God is building a whole new relational activity. And that activity, at its core, is welcome. It's reception, like in **verse 17**. It's treating one another with so much warmth and relational hospitality that we receive one another as if we are receiving Christ himself. We welcome one another as Christ welcomes us.

I'm not just talking about opening up your homes. It's not less than that, but it's much more. In the church, we open up our souls. Every local church should be a little Rivendell, the last homely house East of Eden, an outpost for spiritual rest for travelers and pilgrims on their way to eternal rest. The place where sinners are comforted with good news, where the weary are no longer burdened by rules and regulations, where hopes are mended and evil things dare not enter.

Of course, all of this may sound idealistic to you. In your estimation, the church is the place with all the people who all have potential for hurting you and letting you down. It's an obligation of obedience, not a sanctuary of delight. We are not magical elves—this kind of house of God on Earth is not a given. If it was, Philemon wouldn't have been written, but assumed. But I really believe that when the gospel is truly proclaimed and believed, it paves the way for the kind of relational action that can make it possible for the church to be a resting place. What is that activity, the attitude and actions required to truly welcome and receive one another as Christ has received us? In Philemon 8-16, we get a picture. The relational activity of gospel welcome is 1) Compelling Deference; 2) Emotional Boldness; 3) Eternal Perspective.

Compelling Deference

By deference I mean simply: "humility in action". Paul has already shown this kind of attitude towards Philemon in the way he calls him "beloved" and "fellow worker", but in **verse 8** he goes even further. The word "boldness" here has the secondary connotation of "confidence". When Paul uses this elsewhere in his letters, he uses it to speak about the confidence he has in his apostolic authority. When his message is questioned, he calls upon his own "boldness" and "confidence" that the gospel he preaches is not from himself, but directly from Jesus. That is what it means to have apostolic authority: to have a message directly from Jesus. Paul's apostolic authority is not the basis of his request—he gives no command to Philemon. Instead, in **verse 9**, he *appeals*.

All of this by Paul is intentional. Philemon has an incredibly rhetorical structure: notice how he waits and builds until he can make any request. He is not trying to couch his desires in flowery language, but rather speak to Philemon's heart. It's not rigid obedience he is after, but real persuasion. His appeal is an appeal of love, **verse 9**, likely referring to Philemon's love he has heard about and been comforted by in verses 5 and 7. Paul's title again is not apostle, but rather "old man" and prisoner. Paul is doing one of two things here: either he is using "elder man" to refer to the honor and respect given to those older, and therefore contrasting that with "prisoner"; or he is referring to the idea that in old age, we need others to look out for us, particularly our children, and so he is coupling that with his imprisonment as a way to show he is doubly weak. Regardless of



whether he is highlighting the honor he has not received in imprisonment or the double weakness he now feels in his imprisonment, the effect would be the same on Philemon. He begins to associate his love for Paul with Paul's lowly situation. Paul too is identifying here with Onesimus, who would have been "imprisoned" because of his disobedience as a runaway slave.

To put it simply, Paul is modeling for Philemon, and for us, how we inspire action in one another. We do not command, force, intimidate, threaten, or trick. We appeal. Whatever rights we have to command, we lay that down as secondary—for even the commands of Christ are commands of love, not law, of delight, not duty. Look further at **verse 13-14**. Paul is very happy for Onesimus to remain with him. He loves his company. In fact, it's likely that one of his purposes in sending Onesimus back is so that Philemon perhaps may send him back to Paul—this is one implied meaning of **verse 20**. But he has such deferential love for Philemon that he would rather Philemon release Onesimus back willingly. He desires Philemon's consent—not compulsion.

Relational love is not possible where love is compulsory. The principle is clear: at the heart of gospel relationships is the desire to lay down our own rights for the sake of our brothers and sisters. We don't need to be right, we don't need to be comfortable, we don't need to get our own way. The action necessary for the true welcome of the church is found in Philippians 2:3-4,

Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.

Count others more significant than yourself. What a revolutionary idea! This was the revolutionary idea that turned the world upside down, because it was Jesus' idea. He didn't only consider us more highly prized than his own life, he showed it. For love's sake, the son of man came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many. Jesus Christ is humility in action. He became a servant, even a slave—though he was due honor and respect due to his elder status as being there from the creation of the world—he did not consider that honor as something to be grasped, but emptied himself. He did it so that his commands would not be commands of compulsion but commands of love. Deference to see his followers as friends and brothers, deference to sacrifice his own self for them—this is what made the cross of Jesus so powerful.

Oftentimes those who rightly emphasize the sovereignty of God in salvation are accused of painting the call of Christ as compulsory. If we are destined to respond to the call, if it is even called irresistible, is that not forced compulsion? Nothing could be further from the truth. The love of Jesus Christ shown to us in his death and resurrection is not like a command we are forced to obey—it's a beauty we are unable to resist. It's an appeal that is so pure, so logical, so glorious, so humble, so deferential to our insecurities, needs, failures, and doubts. Paul says it like this in 2 Cor 5:14-15,



For the love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: that one has died for all, therefore all have died; and he died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised.

The love of Christ controls us, compels us, not because it constrains us into something we don't want, but because it awakens us in freedom to live for the one who died for us. This is Christian relationship: as we model the love of Christ to one another, we compel each other. Not coerce, but appeal. When it comes time to confront one another, to point out sin, to gently correct—we do so with the glorious beauty of Christ's deferential humility out front. We give positive vision, not negative. That is the kind of relational activity that builds welcome in the church.

Emotional Boldness

By emotional boldness I simply mean this: “the guts to put our hearts on the line”. There was a miraculous transition that happened to Philemon in **verse 11**. Onesimus's name means “useful”, so here the apostle is making use of a pun. When he came to Paul, he was useless. This is not to imply anything particularly negative, but simply that Onesimus' state in coming to Paul was full of issues. He had run away from his master, which in Roman society was a very serious offense. It would have not been unheard of for Philemon to turn Onesimus over to be imprisoned, even crucified as a criminal for his actions. His life was over—useless because of his actions. But through the ministry of Paul, he has become part of the family of God—now his life is full of potential and use, no matter the past of his sin his future is bright and his hope is renewed. Even our greatest failures make us useless in the kingdom of God. All of us have transitioned from futile uselessness to usefulness. In Christ, we are living up to our real names as children of God.

I can't get over **verse 12**. Think about the seriousness of this situation. Roman law demands that Onesimus be sent back to his master. But Paul is also aware of Mosaic Law, which states rather clearly “You shall not give up to his master a slave who has escaped from his master to you”. Paul heeds neither laws, but is interested in a new law, the law of Christ. The law of Christ says: “everyone in Christ has a unique place in my heart”. So Paul send Onesimus back, regardless of the risk. He puts his heart out there.

Can you imagine Onesimus coming to deliver the letter back to Collosae? This public letter, about him? Everyone knows Onesimus, the word has got out. Can you imagine the kind of courage and boldness it takes to confront his wrong-doing? Where does that courage come from, knowing what his fate could be? It comes from the love he has already experienced in Paul. It comes, perhaps, from being in the room as the church leaders in his house taught the scripture, as he saw their love for one another. His boldness comes from the heart, the inner seat of emotions. Onesimus is in Paul's heart, and that love gives him the guts to put his own heart on the line, to come to his master and say: “I am sorry, and I love you. Can you love me?”



When we come to Jesus, we come with a broken heart. We come in our chains, in our sin, in our uselessness. And Jesus meets us there. As pastor Bracken reminded us on Good Friday, he opens himself up in boldness. He says: “No longer do I call you servants, or the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you.”

At the cross, he opened up not just his heart but his veins, to heal us with his love, mend us, and welcomes us into the family. And then, he sends us back. We go out into our relationships in Christ, with emotional boldness, our hearts on the line. We go out, compelled by the love of Jesus to open ourselves up in love towards others, to put our hearts out there, knowing they may get hurt and bruised a bit by imperfect people, but that ultimately it’s Jesus’ heart that beats in us, and he will protect us and keep us and love us forever perfectly.

Eternal Perspective

It’s time to address the slavery question. Our translation interprets Philemon’s status as “bondservant”. It does that to help us, but the word is not less than “slave”. Bondservant is a helpful way to show us that slavery in the Roman world was not based on identity of person but on value of service. Slavery was foremost a political institution, not a personal one, although it did have personal effects. There was not a specific race or people group who were enslaved, and again, slavery was not tied to race or human value. You may have become a slave for numerous reasons—you were a prisoner of war, you were destitute and gave yourself to slavery to have a place to eat. Perhaps you were born into slavery, or abandoned at birth and taken in. Historians estimate that ⅓ to ⅔ of the population of the Roman world were slaves of some kind. ² Rome cared about the economic impact of slaves.

In a well-ordered and just Roman society, there actually could be some benefit to slaves. Impoverished, near death people could suddenly find themselves with worthwhile work in a home. In the Mosaic Law, indentured servitude, a kind of slavery, was given to Israel as a way to care for those in their midst who had great debts. They would be treated fairly and well, and released after 6 years. But just because slavery was different in the Mosaic Law or Roman world than in colonial England or the antebellum American South, does not mean it was part of God’s original plan for his people, nor does it mean slavery has a place in a Christian society or community. Slavery of any kind, in any place, is an institution that is ripe for oppression and at best an uneasy stopgap for our own lust for power. It’s a result of our own sin and the brokenness of the world.

Paul does not seem willing to address outright the morality of slavery as a political institution, but at least we can ask the question: did Paul intend Onesimus to be freed? Is this what he means by **verse 16**? If so, why didn’t he just say so? Why doesn’t he outright condemn the practice of slavery? The answer to this comes in lifting our eyes and recognizing the powerful perspective that is being shown in Philemon. To put it bluntly, the institution of Roman slavery was not the enemy Paul was

² <https://www.worldhistory.org/article/629/slavery-in-the-roman-world/>



fighting. He knew that in the power of the gospel, if God was really building a whole new society and family, slavery stood no chance. No one changed by the gospel could ever see a slave/master relationship in the same way ever again. This is why in **verse 8** he says what he is asking of Philemon is *required*. The living out of gospel love *necessarily* over time creates a culture where slavery makes no sense, where all are treated, **verse 16**, not just according to their legal status, but far more than that, according to their status in the family of God. When Paul says that Onesimus is to be treated as a beloved brother, he actually means that. The legal eradication of the institution of slavery can't do that. When he says that Onesimus is a brother, "both in the flesh and in the Lord", he means that Onesimus now, in his body, in this age, is a brother. He isn't just a slave until they get to heaven, then he is a brother—but that his spiritual identity as "brother in the Lord" actually informs his relationship with Philemon in real time. Whether or not Philemon frees Onesimus legally is besides the point, the point is: "how would he treat a beloved brother?" Who enslaves their beloved brother?

Paul is so careful here, in a way that some of us are annoyed at because we want him to condemn certain social structures, and others are annoyed at because we want more room for our own excuses for oppression. But Paul does not want legal action to be the thing that changes the world—he wants the gospel love of Jesus Christ to change the world. Because where the gospel goes, change happens. But the gospel is about the building of Christ's kingdom through Christ's family in Christ-like relationships before it is ever about the building of worldly government.

But meanwhile [in Philemon] a principle is boldly enunciated, which must in the end prove fatal to slavery.... When the Church carried out this principle by admitting the slave to her highest privileges, inviting him to kneel side by side with his master at the same holy table; when in short the Apostolic precept that 'in Christ Jesus is neither bond nor free' was not only recognised but acted upon, then slavery was doomed. Henceforward it was only a question of time.³

The gospel of Jesus Christ creates a culture where oppression is doomed, where supremacy of any kind is completely out of place. Why? Because of what we find in **verse 15**. The reception of Onesimus to Philemon is *forever*. The spiritual family of God goes further than this life—it goes all the way into eternity. To achieve governmental peace without spiritual peace is to trade eternity for a few passing years on earth. We need men and women fighting for the reconciliation of mankind in government, in social work, in education, in the city and the nation—but we need these men and women first to be motivated by the vision not of a flourishing American dream but the vision of Heaven. Jesus said: go and make disciples—because following Jesus is the one activity of our life that truly changes everything. It is subversive in our families, our friendships, our homes, and our societies. God is building an eternal kingdom—and the foundation of that kingdom is not in laws and structures but in people, in relationships with eternal perspective. You will be my brother, my sister, *forever*.

³ J.B. Lightfoot, *The Epistle of Paul to Philemon*



Before his death, Jesus told his disciples, and us: “I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also.” The good news of Jesus creates a whole new relational activity, wherein we start living like we really will all share a eternal home together.

John Newton once wrote to a friend of his who we knew was preparing to engage in some public disagreement with another pastor. Here is the advice he gave:

In a little while you will meet in heaven; he will then be dearer to you than the nearest friend you have upon earth is to you now. Anticipate that period in your thoughts; and though you may find it necessary to oppose his errors, view him personally as a kindred soul, with whom you are to be happy in Christ forever.

In Christ, all of us are headed for forever happiness in God’s house, the place of complete rest, the final homely house. Jesus was un-welcomed to welcome us there. Let us welcome each other and receive each other as Christ has welcomed us: as family, forever.

