



A Whole New Relational Reality

Philemon 1-7

Grace Church | 4.17.22

For the next three weeks, every week we will be reading the entirety of and preaching from parts of the book of Philemon. We are going all in with this book. Why Philemon? Here is a book that you pass over swiftly in your reading—not simply because it is short, but because it is so *personal*. It's peering into some sort of issue with three men, and it never quite gets right to the point. It seems hidden with coded hints or language, as only friends and close confidants would understand. So what gives? Let me give you three reasons we need Philemon today.

We are bent towards loneliness. When Galileo followed Copernicus in insisting that the Earth was not in fact the center of our galaxy, he was imprisoned for life. No one likes to hear that they are not all-important. But this is why we are so lonely: not because we lack opportunities for friendship and relationship, but because we are naturally self-absorbed. Francis Schaefer puts it this way:

Man, having put himself rather than God at the center of the universe, constantly tends to turn inward instead of outward. This is the essence of his rebellion against God... But when I turn inward, there is no one to communicate with. And so each man in himself is exactly like the bull headed minotaur shut up in his personal solitude in his labyrinth in Crete. This is the tragedy of man. When he turns inward, there is no one there to answer.¹

We are so connected, yet so alone. We are people of hurry, of productivity, and of efficiency. But we rarely have enough time to connect on a heart level. Philemon shows us a better way.

We traffic in division. Can we be honest about how relationships work in our online age? We are being taught to assume the worst about one another until proven wrong. We are taught that life is full of dichotomies: us and against them; wrong against right; right against left. We have labels for everyone. Division is baked into the potentiality of our relationships. We traffic in it. A couple of months ago a religion writer from the NyTimes interviewed me about baptism. I said a lot of great things about the theology of baptism and our practice, [but she pulled a silly quote I made in reference to something else](#). No worries, that is her job. But you know what? There were people online who used my words as a negative example, who assumed very easily from the half a sentence they had not just who I really was, but what our church was like! Phew.

¹ Francis Schaefer, *True Spirituality*



We are in need of a whole new relational paradigm. One pastor has said that Philemon acts like a mirror. It's an example of how relationships transformed by the power of the gospel truly operate. It gives us the opportunity to say: "do our relationships together look like this"? We need Philemon because so often we lack mirrors. We don't know how others see us, we don't know how we view others. We can't tell if our relationships are strained, if they look more like the world or more like Heaven. Pay attention in this book and you will begin to notice the ways our relational Dynamics in the church have been supernaturally changed in Jesus.

Imagine what your relationships will be like in Heaven. No more loneliness, no more division, no more strife, no more mistrust, no more miscommunication, no more self-centeredness. There is coming a day where we will perfectly "outdo one another in showing honor" and truly "welcome one another as Christ has welcomed us." Philemon gives us a glimpse into the culture of heaven, a culture the church is meant to model here on earth. In this example of Paul, Philemon, and Onesimus, we find three parts to play. Philemon is the one who appears to be wronged. Our best reading points us to the face that his slave Onesimus has wronged him, runaway from his care, fled west to escape his master. Perhaps the relationship was strained, perhaps Onesimus was unruly, headstrong. But either way, Onesimus was acting fleshly, that is, he was not in Christ. But now, by the influence of Paul, he is a child of God, a brother to his master Philemon. The relationship has completely changed, the nature of one man transformed. Paul then is the mediator, the reconciler between two men who used to be at odds and now share the same spiritual DNA. Philemon is about what happens when loneliness, division, and relational strife meets the supernatural world of gospel love and charity. In short, Philemon shows us how the gospel builds in God's people:

1. A whole new relational reality (1-7)
2. A whole new relational activity (8-16)
3. A whole new relational stability (17-25)

So today let's focus on verses 1-7, and we will find a whole new relational reality. That is, 1) you have a family; 2) you are rich; 3) you are loved.

You have a family (1-3)

Let's take a look at Paul's greeting in **verse 1**. This is one of only three times in the New Testament where Paul does not start his greeting with the title "apostle" of Jesus. And while Paul wrote other letters while he was in prison, it is only in Philemon that he begins his letter by identifying himself as a "prisoner" for Christ. What is his aim? We could say this lack of authoritative title is just due to the personal nature of this letter. It's casual, we may say, not a "work" letter. True, but I also believe this is hinting at Paul's demeanor and attitude towards Philemon, who he calls a "fellow worker" in **verse 1**. Already the stage is being set: Paul is not going to command a subservient protege, rather he is going to "appeal" to a brother, see **verse 10**.

Even in his other letters, Paul uses his apostolic title and authority very carefully—always to affirm



the validity of the gospel he preaches—never to build himself up or command his own wishes. This is because the world the gospel creates in Christ’s church is not a world without authority and title, but a world in which authority is used rightly. Philemon is also a man familiar with authority: as the owner of the house where the church met, and as head of a household with servants and slaves, he was a wealthy man, well respected and looked up to. But Paul doesn’t have to compare resumes: his primary identity in relation to Philemon, who it is likely based on **verse 19** he himself led to faith, is not one of a commanding officer but a fellow worker, a humble prisoner appealing to a dear friend. What does this teach us? That coercion and title dropping are relics of relational dynamics that got crucified with Jesus. Jesus did not shed his authority, nor his titles, when he came to save us. But in his humility, he became a servant, a prisoner, a fellow-worker—putting his authority to us for us, not over us. Because we find our first identity in him—Christian, child of God, in Christ—we are safe to relate to one another in perfect deference, whether we be prisoners, free, pastors, members, mothers, sons, students or teachers.

The familial language comes out right away too. Timothy, who is not writing the letter but there with Paul affirming it, is called “our brother”. In **verse 2** the letter is also addressed to Apphia, our “sister”. We are not sure if Apphia and Archippus are leaders in the church in Colossae that meets in Philemon’s house, or perhaps part of his nuclear family who also live in his house, but we do know this: Paul addresses them with honor. ***No one in the family of God can escape the honor of the family of God.*** The customary greeting in **verse 3** shows us, all are bestowed grace from God equally, coming through Jesus Christ. None of us were more deserving of free grace, and that unifying truth is what leads to the peace of the gospel. All of this is a family under God the Father and the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

It is no small detail that the letter is also addressed to the church in Philemon’s house. This is a letter that would have been read and presented to the entire congregation. The “you” in **verse 3** is plural, as is the “your” in **verse 25**. Every other address in the book is singular, showing it is a personal letter for a public reception. We may be shocked that such a personal appeal about a family issue would be made public, but this again shows the nature of the church as envisioned in God’s word: all the affairs of our life are bound together. When one weeps, we all weep, when one rejoices, we all rejoice.

We belong to one another. That is a brand new reality. The church of Jesus Christ, the actual gathering of his people, the relationships formed there and the friendships forged there, is the *real* world. We don’t live our lives and then come to church to learn to live our lives outside of the church—the church is the place where we are so bound together it is the place where we live our lives.

Now I am not saying you don’t make personal decisions, that you don’t have personal friends, that we are drawn in together like some sort of inescapable commune. What I am saying is that you are meant by God to belong to and place as your priority God’s church, his number one plan for his



kingdom to come on earth, the very place, where as one commentator puts it, where God is establishing “little oases where an alternative way of life is being practiced and can be observed.”²

Look, Philemon’s house, this little church, made it into the Bible! How many people can you shove into a house? A hundred? But here is a place that we still talk about. The local church is the most important institution in the world.³ It’s here where former enemies, strangers, and self-serving busybodies come together and showcase to the world that real love is possible and deep and beautiful. We are bound together in Christ’s family, Jesus went up and bled out to make it so.

You are rich (4-6)

I want you to look at how Paul addresses Philemon in **verse 4**. He *prays* for him. Paul has many people to pray for, but Philemon is dear to him, he *remembers* him in his prayers. And not only that, he thanks God for him. When you look at your fellow brothers and sisters in the church, when you happen to remember them, is your first thought thanksgiving? It is nearly impossible to despise someone you pray for. If you remembered and prayed for Kim Jong Un every day for the next three weeks, you could find things to thank God for. You could say: “thank you God for creating Kim-Jong Un, who in your providence has a part to play in the bringing about of your glory.” After a few times praying, I guarantee you your heart would soften towards him. Did he suddenly become honorable? No. Does this excuse his vile actions? No. But suddenly, you feel a common kinship. All it takes is remembering.

You may get annoyed at some of them sometimes, some of them may hurt your feelings or do something that feels untrustworthy or rubs you the wrong way, but none of your church members are Kim-Jong-Un. In fact, all of them are members of the household of God, so your prayerful thanksgiving for them is actually much easier! Look what Paul has to thank God for in Philemon’s life in **verse 5**. Here is, I believe, the best translation of what Paul is saying. Philemon has two things that everyone says about him: 1) he has faith in Jesus; and 2) he loves the church. The word order is a bit confusing, but Paul isn’t saying Philemon has faith in the church. I believe he puts “love” before faith because he deems it as more important, but that love is pointed most directly towards the saints. Here is what I want to see: every member of our church possesses at least two things that we affirm: 1) faith in Jesus; and 2) love for the church. Otherwise, why would they join Christ’s church? So, here is the kicker—when you look at the life of anyone in Christ’s church, you have so much to be thankful for. Even the smallest, weakest, or most new to faith, God has made them alive! He has turned them from an enemy to a brother or sister. How amazing is that! When we pray for one another out of thanksgiving to God, we are saying: each one of us is a walking miracle. When we pray for one another out of thanksgiving to God, we are building a culture where together we marvel at the grace of God. Try this: find someone in the church to whom you can say: “You are a miracle. You matter. I pray for you, and every time I do, I thank God for you.”

² Dick Lucas, *The Message of Colossians and Philemon*

³ Thanks to TJ Tims, Immanuel Nashville for pointing this out in his sermon on Philemon.



What does Paul pray? We find it in verse 6. Again the syntax is a bit confusing, and it's confusing in the Greek too. The crux is understanding the word "sharing" of your faith. This does not refer to evangelism—although a good thing to pray, Paul is not praying that Philemon would go out and tell people about Jesus. That word sharing is the word for "fellowship". Paul uses it when he says we have "share" in God's son (1 Cor 1:9) and "share" in his sufferings (Phil 3:10). Paul is praying that Philemon would have a robust fellowship of faith—that the social aspect of his Christian life would explode with love to the point where it acts as a lesson in the blessings of God. In other words, Paul prays: "Philemon, when you share in your faith with other Christians, I pray you would be led to understand and live into the goodness of those relationships."

That is a good prayer. It is a prayer that asks God to wake us up to just how radically amazing his church is, the knowledge of how good it is to belong. Every good thing that is in us comes to us through Christ saving us into his church. We are rich inheritors of the knowledge of God. The church is the fountain of God's blessings in Christ. It's where the gospel is actually embodied, acted, fleshed out.

Think about this: the church can be the place where if you fall into a pit of despair, someone is reaching down with the rope of the gospel. It can be the place where when your life is uprooted and out of your control, someone can knock on your door with a hug, a prayer, and maybe a casserole. It can be the place where you come to unburden yourself from the sin you are carrying around. It can be the place where your fears come into the ears of those who are ready to embrace you in a way you maybe have not been embraced since you were a child with nightmares. It can be the place where you meet new mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters. It's fellowship, sharing—that is the heart of the church. Everything we have is for one another. Where else can you go for that?

Jesus died for that. And he rose to make sure it would last forever. In the church, you matter, you are worth praising God for, because God broke into your life and gave you faith in his Son and love for his church. You matter, and here is some evidence: Jesus prayed for you. Now, he lives to make intercession for you if you are his. And he is thankful for you, proud of your faith and your love. You are part of the shared faith, so you are worth praying for and caring for. The fact that he went to the cross showed you mattered to Christ—the fact that he built a church shows you still matter. That is rich, and what this does, when we have been given so much, is creates a true *fellowship* where we are eager, as Paul encourages Philemon to be with Onesimus, to give freely to one another rich love.

You are loved (7)

One of the interpretive keys for the short book of Philemon is noticing Paul's unique use of the word "heart". You see it here in **verse 7**. Because of Philemon's simple faith and love for the church, the *hearts* of the church were refreshed. It's also in **verse 12**. Onesimus is so loved by Paul that he is called "his very heart". And finally, the quest of Paul to Philemon in **verse 20**, "refresh my heart in



Christ.” What Philemon is teaching us is that in the new relational reality of the church, we don’t deal at the superficial, handshake level. We operate on the heart level. The church is this unique place that doesn’t just meet physical needs. It’s a place where parched and thirsty hearts come to drink.

What is the water that quenches dry hearts? It’s love. Philemon is *beloved* to Paul in **verse 1**. That is not a modifier in the original language, it’s not describing the kind of worker he is. It’s its own title, a noun, not an adjective. Beloved—one who is dearly loved. Paul himself in **verse 7** notes how it’s Philemon’s love that have given him both joy and comfort. In **verse 9** it is because of love that Paul makes his appeal. Love is the relational currency of the church.

This is of utmost importance. Alan Noble, in his book *You Are Not Your Own*, reminds us of the great catechisms of the reformation which teach that our greatest comfort in life and death is that we belong to Jesus. But what good is it to belong to Jesus, what comfort is it, if that belonging is not a belonging of love?

The great comfort found in belonging to Christ is that we are accepted and loved without reservation... That acceptance is not the cheap acceptance of modern social psychology, which is only really concerned with producing productive and well-adjusted consumers. Christ truly knows us and his acceptance unites us to him, sanctifying us by teaching moment by moment to love what is true and good and beautiful—to love his will.⁴

In other words, Google knows you. But Google loves the money it makes off of knowing you. Jesus knows you, and really loves you, and his love refreshes, renews, restores you, into someone lovable and lovely and full of love for his church.

Friend, Christ is building a whole new relational reality in his church, and you matter to it. You can be known, but also loved. You just have to open up your heart to love and be loved. The church should be a place not where our sin is ignored, but where our faults never shout louder than our love. In other words: a place free of condemnation. Spurgeon said: “Faults are always thick where love is thin. A white cow is all black if your eye chooses to make it so.”⁵ Let’s be people of thick love, because Jesus’ blood is really, really thick.

God is building a whole new relational reality in his church. Can we just sit for a second and take in the reality that Jesus died for his church? Do you think his plan was to die for a glorified homeowners association? So that we could all share a treadmill and rowing machine together? So we could have a few laughs and go back to our disappointing lives? Jesus paid his own blood to purchase his church because he wanted to pay the highest price for that which is most precious to him. Look around, there is so much to be thankful for, walking miracles all around you. These people actually love you. Be refreshed, be comforted. This is what the gospel does.

⁴ Alan Noble, *You Are Not Your Own*, 202.

⁵ Spurgeon, *Plowman’s Talk*

