

THE PEOPLE LOVING PLACE - Refreshing Hearts

Introduction

There are books in the Bible that change the way we understand God. There are books that deepen our understanding of salvation. And then there are books like Philemon that quietly, but powerfully, change the way we treat people. It's only twenty-five verses long. You can read it in just a few minutes. Yet within this little letter, God gives us one of the clearest pictures in all of Scripture of what the gospel looks like when it truly takes root in a human heart. I believe that's why this is the perfect place for us to begin asking a question we've been asking as a church for years.

What does The People Loving Place actually look like?

For years we've said we want to be **The People Loving Place**, and I love that vision because it reminds us that church is more than a place we attend—it's a people we're becoming. But if we're honest, it's easy to define that vision by outward actions. We think it means smiling at people, greeting them at the door, serving coffee, or remembering someone's name. Those things matter, and I pray they always characterize our church.

But Jesus is after something much deeper. He isn't simply creating a friendly church. He's creating a transformed people whose relationships reflect His own heart. A people who love differently because they have been loved by Christ. A people who forgive because they have been forgiven. A people whose lives become living evidence

that the gospel really does change people. That's exactly what Paul celebrates in Philemon.

Historical Context

Paul writes this letter while imprisoned for preaching the gospel. He's writing to a believer named Philemon, a respected leader in the church at Colossae. In fact, the church gathered in his home. Before there were church buildings, there were faithful men and women who opened their homes, shared their tables, and welcomed God's people like family.

Every great story has tension, and this one centers around three men. Paul. Philemon. And Onesimus.

One is sitting in a prison cell. One has been deeply wronged. One is returning home wondering how he'll be received.

Onesimus had run away from Philemon, but somewhere along the way, he met the apostle Paul. More importantly, he met Jesus Christ. The gospel transformed his life, and now Paul is sending him home carrying this very letter.

Can you imagine the moment? How will Philemon respond? Will he respond with anger or mercy? Justice or grace?

That's the tension that unfolds throughout the rest of this letter. But here's what fascinates me. Paul doesn't begin with the conflict. He begins with grace.

Before Paul ever asks Philemon to do something difficult, he reminds him of what God has already been doing in his life. That's often how

God works. **God establishes our identity before He calls us into obedience.**

Before He asks us to forgive, He reminds us that we've been forgiven. Before He asks us to love, He reminds us that we've been loved. Before He asks us to extend grace, He reminds us of the grace we have already received through Jesus Christ.

Fallen Condition Focus

That's where many of us struggle. Our sinful nature doesn't just damage relationships; it teaches us to see people through the lens of ourselves. We naturally measure relationships by what we're receiving instead of what we're becoming. We quietly ask:

"Am I appreciated?" "Am I understood?" "Is anyone meeting my needs?" But the gospel changes the question.

Instead of asking, *"What can I get from this relationship?"* we begin asking, *"How can Christ love someone through me?"*

That kind of transformation doesn't happen through personality, willpower, or self-improvement. It happens because the gospel changes the human heart.

Big Idea: The gospel changes us so deeply that others experience Christ through us.

Church, remember this as we study Philemon together: **healthy relationships are never the root of Christianity; they're the fruit. The root is the gospel.** Paul isn't inviting us to become nicer people or simply try harder. He's inviting us to see what the grace of Jesus

produces in a transformed life. That's the truth I believe Paul wants us to discover tonight. As we read these opening verses, listen for the evidence of Christ's transforming work in Philemon's life.

Philemon 1-7

¹ Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, To Philemon our dear friend and fellow worker— ² also to Apphia our sister and Archippus our fellow soldier—and to the church that meets in your home: ³ Grace and peace to you^[a] from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. ⁴ I always thank my God as I remember you in my prayers, ⁵ because I hear about your love for all his holy people and your faith in the Lord Jesus. ⁶ I pray that your partnership with us in the faith may be effective in deepening your understanding of every good thing we share for the sake of Christ. ⁷ Your love has given me great joy and encouragement, because you, brother, have refreshed the hearts of the Lord's people.

As we walk through these verses together, Paul isn't simply describing one remarkable Christian. He's showing us the kind of person the gospel creates.

So here's the question I want all of us to carry throughout this message:
Can people experience Christ through my life?

Point One - Grace Produces a Life Worth Thanking God For

Philemon 4-5

Paul begins this letter in a way that may surprise us. If you knew you were about to ask someone to do something incredibly difficult, where would you begin? Most of us would get right to the issue. But not Paul.

Listen to how he begins in verse 4: *"I always thank my God as I remember you in my prayers, because I hear about your love for all his holy people and your faith in the Lord Jesus."*

Did you notice something? Paul doesn't thank **Philemon**. He thanks **God** for Philemon.

That's not just a polite introduction. It's a profound theological statement. Paul understands something we often forget. Every evidence of spiritual maturity is ultimately the work of God's grace. Philemon's love didn't begin with Philemon. His faith didn't originate with Philemon. His character wasn't the result of personality or willpower. It was the evidence that God had been at work in his life.

Paul says something very similar in Philippians 1:6: *"...he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus."* God begins the work. God continues the work. God deserves the glory for the work.

I wonder how often we stop to thank God for what He's doing in the lives of other believers.

It's easy to notice people's weaknesses. It's easy to point out where someone still needs to grow. Paul chooses a different starting point. He celebrates the grace of God.

Church, what if we became the kind of people who were quicker to recognize God's work than someone else's shortcomings?

The greatest compliment another believer can receive isn't, "You're impressive." It's, "When I look at your life, I thank God." Because I know only Jesus could have produced what I see.

That's exactly what Paul is doing. He's looking at Philemon's life and saying, "God has been at work in you, and I can't help but give Him thanks."

That should cause every one of us to pause and ask: **When people look at my life, do they simply notice me...or do they see evidence of God's grace?**

Point Two - Grace Becomes Visible in the Way We Love People

Philemon 5-6

Paul continues, *"Because I hear about your love for all his holy people and your faith in the Lord Jesus."*

Notice the order. Faith in Christ. Love for people.

The vertical relationship always overflows into the horizontal relationship.

Jesus taught the very same truth when He said the greatest commandments are to love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself. Genuine faith never remains private. It becomes visible in the way we treat people.

Paul even writes in Galatians 5:6, *"The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love."*

That's exactly what he sees in Philemon. He doesn't merely hear about his theology. He hears about his love. He doesn't merely hear that Philemon believes the right things. He hears that people are experiencing the fruit of those beliefs.

Church, that's an important reminder for us. The truest measure of spiritual maturity isn't simply how much Scripture we know. It's whether the gospel is changing the way we love.

Knowledge matters. Doctrine matters. Truth matters. But biblical truth is never meant to terminate in our minds. It is meant to transform our hearts.

Then Paul says something fascinating in verse 6: *"I pray that your partnership with us in the faith may be effective in deepening your understanding of every good thing we share for the sake of Christ."*

The word translated **partnership** is the Greek word *koinōnia*. Many of us hear that word and immediately think of fellowship meals or coffee after church. But *koinōnia* is much richer than that. It means sharing in a common life because we share a common Savior. We belong to one another because we belong to Christ.

Paul's prayer isn't simply that Philemon would know more about the gospel. He's praying that the gospel Philemon already believes would become increasingly evident in the life he lives.

That's discipleship. We don't mature because we move beyond the gospel. We mature because we understand the gospel more deeply and allow it to shape every area of our lives.

The more we understand how Christ has loved us... the more we love others.

The more we understand His forgiveness... the more freely we forgive.

The more we understand His grace... the more gracious we become.

Church, that's what The People Loving Place begins to look like.

Not perfect people. Not people who have it all together. But ordinary people whose lives increasingly make the grace of Jesus visible.

So let me ask you a question before we move on.

If someone watched your life this past week, what evidence would convince them that Jesus is transforming your heart?

Because that's what Paul saw in Philemon. And that's what Christ desires to produce in every one of us.

Point Three - Grace Refreshes Weary Hearts

Philemon 7

Everything Paul has said now comes to a beautiful conclusion.

Listen to verse 7: *"Your love has given me great joy and encouragement, because you, brother, have refreshed the hearts of the Lord's people."*

That word **refreshed** is a beautiful word. It literally means to give rest, to revive, or to bring relief to someone who has grown weary. It paints the picture of someone who has been carrying a heavy burden and finally finds a place where they can breathe again.

Paul says, "Philemon, that's who you've become."

People leave your presence stronger than when they arrived. People encounter hope when they're around you. People find encouragement because of the way you love them.

Then Paul uses another remarkable word. He says Philemon has refreshed the **hearts** of God's people.

The Greek word is *splanchna*. It referred to the deepest part of a person—the place of compassion, affection, and emotion. We might say today, "the very core of who they are."

Paul isn't saying that Philemon simply made people smile. He's saying that people were strengthened in the deepest places of their lives.

Church, isn't that the kind of person you want to become? Not someone who's merely pleasant to be around. But someone whose life leaves people with greater faith, greater hope, and greater confidence in the goodness of God.

I think one of the most searching questions we can ask ourselves is this:

What happens to people after they've spent time with me?

Do they leave more encouraged? Do they leave more hopeful? Do they leave feeling seen, loved, and valued? Or do they leave carrying one more burden?

The reality is that every one of us creates an atmosphere wherever we go.

In our homes. At work. At school. In our Life Groups. Here at church.

The question isn't whether we influence people. The question is **what kind of influence we leave behind.**

Paul says Philemon left people refreshed. Church, wouldn't that be a beautiful reputation for Light & Life?

That weary people walk through these doors and find hope. That broken marriages find grace. That struggling parents find encouragement. That lonely people discover family. That those who are far from God encounter the love of Christ through His people.

I don't know about you, but that's the kind of church I want us to become. Not because it's our slogan. Because it's the kind of church the gospel creates.

Gospel Connection

As beautiful as Philemon's example is, this passage isn't ultimately about Philemon. It's about Jesus.

Long before Philemon refreshed weary hearts... Jesus refreshed his.

Long before Philemon welcomed others... Jesus welcomed him.

Long before Philemon extended grace... Jesus poured out grace upon him.

Everything Paul celebrates in Philemon is first true of Christ.

Jesus is the One who looked at weary crowds with compassion. Jesus is the One who welcomed sinners, touched lepers, and restored the broken. Jesus is the One who said in Matthew 11:28, *"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest."*

Church, that's the invitation of the gospel. Jesus doesn't simply forgive our sins. He restores our souls. He doesn't simply remove our guilt. He gives us new life.

And as His grace changes us, something beautiful begins to happen. The refreshment we've received from Christ begins overflowing into the lives of others.

That's why Paul could celebrate Philemon. His life had become a living testimony to the transforming power of the gospel.

Bottom Line

Church, after everything we've seen tonight, here's the truth I hope you'll carry with you this week:

People who have experienced the refreshing grace of Christ become refreshers of others.

Before we talk about how we live that out, I want you to consider one question. **Can people experience Christ through your life?** Because that's exactly what the gospel is producing in every believer who continues to surrender to Him.

Challenge

Church, every one of us is going to encounter weary people this week.

Some will be carrying burdens no one else knows about. Some will be discouraged. Some will be anxious. Some will be grieving. Some will simply need to know that someone sees them.

The question isn't whether you'll meet weary people.

The question is, **what will they experience when they meet you?**

Will they experience criticism... or compassion?

Will they experience judgment... or grace? Will they experience someone consumed with themselves... or someone so transformed by Jesus that they leave feeling closer to Him?

This week, don't simply ask, *"Who can encourage me?"*

Ask, *"Lord, who can You encourage through me?"* Ask Him to open your eyes. Ask Him to interrupt your schedule. Ask Him to help you notice the person everyone else walks past. Because that's exactly what Jesus has done for every one of us.

Invitation / Altar Response

Before Paul ever celebrated Philemon for refreshing others, something had already happened. Christ had refreshed him.

And maybe that's where some of us find ourselves tonight.

You came to church weary. You're carrying burdens that no one else can see. Maybe it's anxiety. Maybe it's disappointment. Maybe it's a relationship that's been broken for years. Maybe you've been faithfully serving everyone else while quietly running on empty yourself.

Listen again to the words of Jesus: *"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest."* (Matthew 11:28)

Notice what Jesus doesn't say. He doesn't say, "Come to Me after you've figured everything out." He doesn't say, "Come to Me once you've cleaned up your life."

He simply says, **"Come."** Church, **You cannot give away what you have never received.**

Before Christ calls us to refresh weary people, He invites weary people to Himself.

So tonight I want to invite three groups of people to respond.

First, if you've never placed your faith in Jesus Christ, this invitation is for you. The greatest refreshment your soul will ever know is the forgiveness, grace, and new life that Jesus freely offers through His death and resurrection.

Second, maybe you're already a believer, but you've realized tonight that you're exhausted. You've been carrying burdens that were never meant to be carried alone. Jesus is inviting you to find your rest in Him again.

And finally, perhaps the Holy Spirit has gently revealed that your life hasn't been reflecting the heart of Christ. You know He's calling you to become someone who encourages more freely, forgives more quickly, loves more deeply, and refreshes the people around you.

If God is speaking to your heart tonight, I want to invite you to step out and meet Him here. Our pastors and prayer team would love to pray with you.

Weekly Commission

Church, every week we're going to ask the same question. **What does The People Loving Place look like?**

Tonight, Paul gives us our first answer. **The People Loving Place refreshes weary people.**

So as you go into your homes... your workplaces... your schools... your neighborhoods... and everywhere God sends you this week...

remember this: **People who have experienced the refreshing grace of Christ become refreshers of others.**

Church... Let's be **The People Loving Place.**

Blessing

May the Father, who has welcomed you into His family, fill your heart with His love.

May the Son, who gives rest to the weary, make you a source of His grace and refreshment to everyone you meet.

May the Holy Spirit continue transforming you so deeply that others experience Christ through your life.

Go in peace. Amen.