

THE PEOPLE LOVING PLACE — A New Identity | Philemon 12–16

Introduction

I think one of the deepest questions every human being wrestles with is a simple one: **Where do I belong?** We start asking it earlier than we realize. As kids, we want to know where we fit in. At school, we want to know who our people are. As we get older, the places change, but the question doesn't. Do I belong here? Am I wanted here? Is there a place for me? And we spend a lot of our lives trying to answer that question.

Some people find their belonging in their family. Others find it in their career, their relationships, their accomplishments, their culture, or even their church. But the problem is that if our identity is built primarily on any of those things, what happens when they change? What happens when the relationship ends? When the career is gone? When the people you thought would always be there aren't there anymore? What happens when your own choices leave you wondering whether there's still a place for you? Because sometimes our deepest struggle isn't simply, **"Can I be forgiven?"** Sometimes it's: **"After everything that's happened, do I still belong?"** And that's what makes these few verses in Philemon so beautiful. Because Onesimus isn't simply coming back with a changed life.

He's coming back to a changed relationship. Paul is about to tell Philemon that the man who left his household cannot be received merely according to the place he occupied before. Something has happened that is greater than Onesimus's past. **He belongs to Jesus now.** And because he belongs to Jesus, he belongs to a new family.

Historical Context

Remember the tension we've been following throughout this letter. Onesimus had been enslaved in Philemon's household and somehow became separated from him. Paul later indicates that Onesimus may also have wronged Philemon or owed him something. But somewhere between leaving Philemon and the writing of this letter, Onesimus encounters Paul. And through Paul's ministry, he encounters Jesus. Now Paul is sending him back. Think about what that journey home must have felt like. Onesimus knows where he's been. He knows what happened. He knows what Philemon remembers.

But he's returning with something he didn't have when he left. **A new relationship with Jesus Christ.** And Paul wants Philemon to understand that this changes everything. By the time we reach verse 16, Paul will describe Onesimus with words that would have completely transformed the relationship: **"a dear brother."** Not merely useful. Not merely forgiven. **Brother.**

That's where this passage takes us. The gospel doesn't simply deal with what we've done. It changes **who we belong to.**

Fallen Condition Focus

And I think that's something many Christians struggle to fully receive. We can believe that Jesus forgives our sins while still living like spiritual outsiders. We believe God has saved us, but deep down we wonder whether He really wants us. We know the language of grace, but we still approach God as though we're trying to earn our place. And when we fail, all those old questions come rushing back.

Does God still want me? Have I disappointed Him too many times? Do I really have a place in His family?

Our sinful nature constantly tempts us to build our identity on things that cannot securely tell us who we are—what we've done, what others think about us, what we've accomplished, what we've lost, or where we've failed. But the gospel gives us something stronger. Our deepest identity is not something we achieve. **It's something we receive because we belong to Christ.**

Big Idea

So here's the truth I want us to carry through this passage: **In Christ, your past may tell where you've been, but Jesus tells you where you belong.**

Your past is real. Your story matters. But neither your greatest accomplishment nor your greatest failure gets to determine your deepest identity. **Jesus does.**

Scripture Reading Philemon 12–16

I am sending him—who is my very heart—back to you. **13** I would have liked to keep him with me so that he could take your place in helping me while I am in chains for the gospel. **14** But I did not want to do anything without your consent, so that any favor you do would not seem forced but would be voluntary. **15** Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back forever— **16** no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother. He is very dear to me but even dearer to you, both as a fellow man and as a brother in the Lord.

There's a movement in Paul's words that I don't want us to miss. Onesimus left one way. **He's coming home another.** And Paul is going to show us what grace can do with a life, a story, and ultimately, a place to belong.

Point One — Grace Gives Your Story a New Direction | Philemon 12-14

Paul begins: *"I am sending him—who is my very heart—back to you."*

There's something easy to miss in that sentence. **Onesimus is going back.** The gospel hasn't merely changed what Onesimus believes. It is changing the direction of his life. Remember, Onesimus had become separated from Philemon. Whatever the exact circumstances surrounding his departure, there is now a broken relationship behind him. But after encountering Jesus, Onesimus doesn't simply say, *"Well, that's my past. I'm forgiven now. I'm moving on."* Grace begins moving him back toward what was broken.

That's important because sometimes we talk about a new identity in Christ as though it only changes how we feel about ourselves. But when Jesus changes who we are, eventually it changes how we live. Repentance literally carries the idea of turning. **Grace gives our lives a new direction.**

The man who left is returning. The man who was separated is moving toward reconciliation. And apparently the transformation in Onesimus is significant enough that Paul says: *"I would have liked to keep him with me so that he could take your place in helping me while I am in chains for the gospel."*

Think about that. Paul doesn't simply have sympathy for Onesimus. **Paul trusts Onesimus.** This man has become so valuable to Paul's ministry that Paul would have preferred to keep him there. In fact, immediately before our passage, Paul says in verse 11: *"Formerly he was useless to you, but now he has become useful both to you and to me."*

There's a little wordplay happening there. The name **Onesimus** carried the idea of being *useful* or *beneficial*.

In other words, Onesimus is finally becoming Onesimus. Jesus isn't simply giving this man a better label. **Jesus is producing a different life.**

And church, that's what grace does. Grace meets us exactly where we are, but grace loves us too much to leave us there. When Jesus gets hold of a life, things begin changing.

- Our desires begin changing.
- Our priorities begin changing.
- Our relationships begin changing.
- Our direction begins changing.

Not because we are trying to earn a place with God, but because **we have already found our place in Christ.**

That's the difference. We don't change so that God will receive us. **Because God has received us in Christ, He begins changing us.**

So maybe the question isn't simply, *"Do I believe in Jesus?"*

Maybe we should also ask: **What direction is His grace moving my life?**

Point Two — God Can Redeem Chapters You Would Have Never Written | Philemon 15

Then Paul says something remarkable: *"Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back forever..."*

I love how carefully Paul says this. **"Perhaps."** Paul doesn't pretend to know everything God was doing. He doesn't say, *"God caused Onesimus to leave."* He doesn't say, *"Everything that happened was good."* He simply looks backward at a broken situation and recognizes that somehow, in the middle of all of it, **God has been at work.**

And I think somebody needs that tonight. Because all of us have chapters in our story we never would have written.

Some are the result of our own choices. Things we did.

Decisions we regret. Doors we walked through that we wish we hadn't. Other chapters were written by circumstances we never chose.

Loss. Rejection. Betrayal. Disappointment.

Things that happened to us that should never have happened. And sometimes we look backward and think, *"If only I could erase that chapter."* But Paul gives us another possibility. Not that everything that happened was God's desire. Not that everything painful was secretly good.

But that **God is so redemptive He can enter even the chapters He did not author and refuse to let them be wasted.**

Look at Paul's language: *"For a little while..."* & *"...forever."* Paul sees something bigger than the separation.

Onesimus left Philemon temporarily, but now Paul sees the possibility of something deeper and more lasting emerging from the wreckage. That's redemption.

God doesn't have to author our sin in order to redeem our story

He can meet us in places we arrived at through our own rebellion. He can meet us in places somebody else's sin pushed us into. He can meet us in circumstances nobody wanted. And He can begin doing something there that only grace can do.

That doesn't mean every broken relationship gets restored exactly the way we want. It doesn't mean every consequence disappears. It means **our worst chapters don't get to determine how the story ends.**

Onesimus cannot rewrite how he left. But Jesus is changing how he returns. And maybe that's what some of us need to hear. You cannot go backward and rewrite yesterday. But you can surrender your story to the One who holds tomorrow.

Because when Jesus enters a story, even the chapters we wish had never happened can become places where His redeeming grace is revealed.

And Paul believes something even greater has happened to Onesimus. This isn't simply a man whose direction has changed. It isn't simply a broken story being redeemed.

In verse 16, Paul is about to tell us that **Onesimus has somewhere new to belong.**

Point Three — In Christ, You Belong to a New Family | Philemon 16

And now Paul brings us to the statement everything has been moving toward.

Onesimus is going home. His direction has changed. God is redeeming his story. But Paul says something even greater has happened.

Verse 16: *"no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother."*

Don't move past that too quickly. **"A dear brother."**

Paul says it again at the end of the verse: *"...both as a fellow man and as a brother in the Lord."*

Twice in one verse Paul uses the language of family. Because the deepest thing that has happened to Onesimus isn't simply that he's become more useful. It's not simply that he's made better decisions. It's not even simply that he's been forgiven.

Onesimus belongs to Jesus now. And because he belongs to Jesus, he belongs to the family of God. That's what the gospel does.

The gospel doesn't just change our behavior. **It changes our belonging.**

And I think sometimes we stop short of understanding just how good the good news really is.

We know Jesus forgives us. We know Jesus saves us. We know Jesus gives us eternal life. All of that is gloriously true. But Scripture goes even further. God doesn't simply forgive you and send you on your way.

Jesus brings you into His family

Romans 8:15 says: *"The Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship. And by him we cry, 'Abba, Father.'"*

That's adoption. God doesn't merely change your record. He changes your relationship to Him. You don't stand outside hoping He'll let you in. If you are in Christ, **you are His**. You have a Father. You have brothers and sisters. You have a place at the table. **You belong.**

And maybe that's difficult for some of us to receive. Because we've spent so much of our lives trying to earn belonging. Trying to prove ourselves. Trying to be good enough. Trying to make sure people don't discover the parts of our story we're ashamed of.

And sometimes we bring that same mentality into our relationship with God. We live like we're on spiritual probation.

- *Maybe if I pray enough.*
- *Maybe if I serve enough.*
- *Maybe if I stop struggling with this.*
- *Maybe if I can finally get myself together.*

Then I'll really belong. But adoption doesn't work that way. A child doesn't earn their way into the family every morning. **They live from the reality that they already belong.**

Church, that's what grace gives us. We don't obey God trying to convince Him to make us His children. **We learn to obey because in Christ, He has already welcomed us home.** And that changes how we live.

Gospel Connection

Because this is exactly what Jesus came to accomplish. Sin didn't simply make us people who needed improvement.

Sin separated us from God. We were far from Him. We were guilty before Him. We could never work our way back into His family. So Jesus came for us. The Son of God entered our brokenness, carried our sin to the cross, died in our place, and rose from the grave so that those who were far away could be brought near.

And here's what amazes me about the gospel: **Jesus didn't die merely to get you out of trouble. He died and rose to bring you home.**

That's why Scripture uses the language of adoption. That's why we call God **Father**. That's why Paul can look at a man like Onesimus, with all of his history, and say: **Brother**.

His past hasn't disappeared. But something greater has become true. He belongs to Christ.

And **If you belong to Christ, there is something greater than what you've done.**

- *Something greater than what's been done to you.*
- *Something greater than what you've achieved.*
- *Something greater than what you've lost.*

You are His.

That's where our identity begins. And church, this is where the gospel inevitably changes our relationships too. Because if God is our Father, then the people He has adopted are our family.

That's why Paul can't allow Philemon to think about Onesimus merely according to the old relationship.

Jesus has created a new one. **He's your brother now.** That's what The People Loving Place should look like.

We aren't simply a collection of people who attend the same service. We're not customers who happen to prefer the same church.

We're family because we share the same Father. So When someone comes to Jesus, we don't merely celebrate that another person has been forgiven. **We make room for them in the family.**

That's the gospel displayed in human relationships.

Bottom Line

So church, here's the truth I want us to carry home tonight: **Your past is no longer your primary identity. Christ is.**

Your past may tell us something about where you've been. But it cannot tell you where you ultimately belong. **Jesus does.**

And if you are in Christ, you are not standing outside trying to earn your way in. You have been forgiven. You have been adopted. You have been brought near. **You are His.** You belong to the family of God.

Challenge

So church, I want to bring this down to one question:

Are you living like someone who belongs to God?

Because it's possible to believe the gospel and still live like you're trying to earn your place. You can be saved and still spend your life trying to prove yourself. You can serve, worship, give, pray, and do all the right things while somewhere underneath it all wondering:

Am I doing enough? Is God disappointed in me? Does He still want me after what I've done? But the gospel doesn't tell you to work your way into the family. **The gospel tells you that through Christ, you've been adopted into it.** So stop living like a guest in your Father's house. Stop approaching God as though every failure puts your relationship with Him back up for discussion. Repent when you sin. Receive His correction. Let Him change you. But do it as a son. Do it as a daughter.

Obedience isn't how we earn our place in the family. Obedience is how we learn to live because we are family.

And then there's another side to this. If the church is really a family, we have to make room for the people Jesus brings into it. Onesimus wasn't just Paul's brother. Paul tells Philemon: **He's your brother too.**

The People Loving Place cannot simply be a place where people are welcomed through the doors. It has to be a place where people discover: *There is room for me here.* A place where the lonely find family. Where the outsider is brought near. Where the person who has encountered Jesus isn't permanently kept at arm's length because of where they've been.

Because **when God becomes our Father, His family becomes our family.**

Invitation / Altar Response

And tonight, I wonder if there are some people in this room who need to come home. Maybe you love Jesus, but if you're truthful, you've been living like a spiritual orphan.

Always trying to prove yourself. Always wondering whether you've done enough. Always allowing your failures to make you question whether God still wants you. And tonight the Father wants to remind you: **You are His.**

Not because you've performed perfectly. Not because you've earned your place. Because Jesus made a way for you to come home. Maybe your prayer tonight needs to be: **"Father, teach me to live like I belong to You."**

I want to invite you to come. And maybe for somebody else, you've spent your whole life trying to figure out where you belong.

You've looked for it in relationships. You've looked for it in success. You've looked for it in acceptance. You've looked for it everywhere except Jesus. The gospel says your deepest need isn't to find yourself. **It's to be found in Christ.**

Jesus died for your sins. He rose from the grave. And He is inviting you into something you could never earn for yourself. Forgiveness. New life. **A place in the family of God.** Jesus didn't die merely to get you out of trouble. **He died and rose to bring you home.** So if you need to surrender your life to Jesus tonight, come.

And as we gather around this altar, I want us to pray not merely as individuals. I want us to pray as **family**. Sons and daughters coming to the same Father because Jesus has brought us near.

Weekly Commission

Throughout this series we've been asking: **What does The People Loving Place look like?**

Tonight, I think Philemon gives us another answer: **The People Loving Place sees people through the lens of redemption, and makes room for them in the family.**

So this week, live from the security of knowing that you belong to Christ. And then help somebody else experience the kind of belonging you've received.

Open your home. Make room at your table. Notice the person standing alone. Welcome the person who doesn't know where they fit yet. Treat your brothers and sisters like brothers and sisters. Because church isn't simply somewhere we go. **In Christ, we are a family we belong to.** Church, let's be The People Loving Place by seeing people the way Jesus sees them and welcoming them as family.

Blessing

May **God the Father, who has adopted you into His family**, give you the security of knowing that you are His. May **Jesus Christ, the Son who died and rose to bring you home**, remind you that your past does not determine where you belong. And may **the Holy Spirit, the**

Spirit of adoption, teach you to cry, *"Abba, Father,"* and empower you to love the family God has placed around you.

Go knowing you are forgiven. Go knowing you are welcomed. Go knowing you are His. **You belong.** Amen.