

Philemon The Family of God

A sermon delivered at Calvary Chapel DC Metro
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Last week we began a study of one of the shortest books in the Bible. Philemon is a single chapter, only 25 verses. It's a quick read, and because it's quick, you don't expect it to say as much as it does.

We began our study last week and only made it through the first six words, "Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus." We considered the question: who is this man Paul? And what did it mean for him to introduce himself to someone like Philemon as a prisoner?

This week we're going to make it a little farther, but we're still not going to make it to the main subject of the letter because we've got some more background to dig through first, more foundation to lay. I'm telling you, I've never taught through Philemon before and I was surprised at how much is in here, but as we get into things this morning I hope you'll agree that there's a lot to be considered.

How about the fact that in 25 verses, we meet 12 people? Twelve people! Paul, Jesus, Timothy, Philemon, Apphia, Archipus, Onesimus, Epaphras, Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke. And in this short little letter, we find not only their names, but something of a description of each of them as well. Even God is spoken of as "our Father."

Will you read a few of the verses with me?

1 Paul, [a prisoner of Christ Jesus](#), and Timothy *our brother*,

To Philemon our [beloved friend and fellow laborer](#), 2 to the [beloved Apphia](#), Archippus our fellow soldier, and to the church in your house:

3 Grace to you and peace from God [our Father](#) and [the Lord Jesus Christ](#).

10 I appeal to you for [my son Onesimus](#), whom I have begotten *while* in my chains,

As we'll discuss next week, Onesimus was a slave that belonged to Philemon. He had run away but was now coming back, under his own volition, because Paul had led him to Christ – again, we'll get into that more next week, but for now I just want you to see the relationships being described here.

15 For perhaps he departed for a while for this *purpose*, that you might receive him forever, 16 no longer as a slave but more than a slave—a beloved brother, especially to me but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord.

And finally, after greeting everyone who was with Philemon in Colossae, and talking to him about Onesimus, Paul sends greetings from everyone who is with him in Rome.

23 Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, greets you, 24 *as do* Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, Luke, my fellow laborers.

25 The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ *be* with your spirit. Amen.

So, again, twelve different men and women mentioned in 25 short verses, and every one of them is mentioned as being in some sort of relationship to another. We're told what role they play, how they fit into the rest of the group. Do you see why this morning's sermon is titled, "The Family of God?"

Last week, when we talked about Paul we talked about all he had going on – all his qualifications and credentials, his resume and pedigree and how he gave it all up for the sake of serving Christ. Everything he once had now seemed like nothing compared to what he received in Christ. You remember, he said he counted it "rubbish." It was absolutely meaningless by way of comparison. And we asked ourselves what does that mean for us? What do we value more – our character, our reputation, our career path, or Christ? Not that it's one or the other – but which is most important?

Friends, that's a question we're all going to have keep wrestling with as long as we live in this city because this place is always tempting you with more accomplishment, more events, more more – and God might want you to have some of that – but NEVER at the expense of your relationship with Christ. He might call you to do like several of our brothers and sisters have done and give it all up and step out into Ministry.

We used to have a young man here in the congregation – his name was Luke – Luke was an engineer at Exxon. He was on a good track professionally, in fact, he was up for a promotion and instead he said, "No, thanks. I think God wants me to go to South America and serve in an orphanage and learn Spanish."

Or what about someone like Marissa who used to have a great government job – nice salary, benefits, and stability. But God called her to go on a mission trip to Haiti, and she went. And God pricked her heart and she came back and started taking ESL classes in the evenings so she could teach English to Haitian school kids. And a few months back she quit her job, moved out of her apartment in Arlington and moved to Haiti.

Tim White is the pastor down at Calvary Chapel of Richmond, he used to work for Microsoft. Had a great job – and loved it. But He loved God more. And it was a hard thing, to give up a good job at Microsoft in order to pastor a church – it's a bit of a financial adjustment if you can imagine. But he gave it all up to follow God where God was leading. Tom Hallman down at Calvary Chapel of Williamsburg was a mortgage broker and a

successful business man before God starting stirring his heart and asking: would you be willing to give all this up for Me?

God comes to some people like Luke and Marissa, and Tim and Tom and asks them to give things up for His sake. But with others, He allows everything to be stripped away and for people to become broken in order to see what He wants to do next.

Jaime Hemeon, one of the missionaries we support along with his wife Paula, are down planting Calvary Chapel Liberia, in Costa Rica. When I first met Jaime he was a young, successful, realtor – had over a dozen properties he owned and rented out on top of all the properties he was selling. He and his partner opened up their own real estate brokerage and were halfway into building a massive lakeside investment property when the bottom fell out of the market and like a cascade of falling dominoes that you just can't stop, he watched everything fall apart before his very eyes. He lost property after property and eventually had to take a job driving a delivery truck just to put food on the table while he worried whether the creditors were going to take his own home next.

But in the process of losing it all, having his little 'empire' stripped away, Jaime drew closer and closer to Jesus. He used that time driving the truck to worship and pray and listen to teachings from God's Word and he just kept saying, "Yes, Lord" to whatever God wanted. He took every job that came his way and every ministry opportunity too and over time he caught up on everything and God started saying, "Will you go wherever I send you?" He thought it was going to be to Nepal, but it turned out to be Costa Rica. They've been there for a year and half now and the church is going gangbusters.

Friend, the truth is, serving Christ often costs us something. We either sacrifice things on purpose or we suffer the loss of things – things that we like, things and even people that we love are stripped out of our lives for the sake of Christ - sometimes willingly, sometimes unwillingly.

It's a fact Paul understood quite clearly, and it's part of what was behind him introducing himself as "Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus." He had suffered the loss of every marker of his old life.

But, here's the big point I want to make this morning: Paul didn't just lose for Christ. He also gained. And he gained a lot. Of course he gained freedom from sin and forgiveness with God, he gained eternal life and security. But he gained some other benefits too – benefits you could touch and see and who could talk – Paul gained people in his life, he gained relationships – lots of them judging by this letter to Philemon.

By gaining Christ as his Lord, he gained God as his Father and through that spiritual adoption he gained a whole new family of brothers and sisters in Christ. So that now, yes, he says he is "Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus," but the very next words rolling off his pen are, "and Timothy our brother."

Think about those two words: our brother.

Paul, Timothy and Philemon didn't share a biological mom or dad; they weren't even joined together in a stepfamily. The only thing that bound them together was their common adoption by a Heavenly Father. That's what made a former rabbi like Paul, a half-Jew like Timothy, and a successful businessman like Philemon brothers. It was the only thing they had common but it forged a deep, deep bond.

Jesus began talking about this very idea of finding family or fraternity in God during His earthly ministry. Even though He was fully God He was also fully man and Jesus was born into an earthly family – He had a mother and He had brothers and sisters. And you may remember how one day they were all looking for Him, but He was out teaching. In Matthew's gospel it says:

[Matt 12:46](#) While He was still talking to the multitudes, behold, His mother and brothers stood outside, seeking to speak with Him. [47](#) Then one said to Him, "Look, Your mother and Your brothers are standing outside, seeking to speak with You." [48](#) But He answered and said to the one who told Him, "Who is My mother and who are My brothers?" [49](#) And He stretched out His hand toward His disciples and said, "Here are My mother and My brothers! [50](#) For whoever does the will of My Father in heaven is My brother and sister and mother."

Jesus wasn't necessarily denigrating or disrespecting Mary. He loved her. As He hung on the cross He made provision for John to take care of her. But He was showing us that if we are children of God, adopted by His Heavenly Father, then we have the same quality of intimate relationship with Jesus as any biological sibling might. He welcomes us into a family relationship – He tells us to call God 'Abba' or Father, and that we are Christ's brothers and sisters. In saying this, He wasn't putting his mother and brothers down, He was lifting all of us up into the same status – showing that we, as His followers, have the same access to Him as a mother or brother would to their own biological family – we get that kind of familiarity and kinship with our Savior.

And because we have this kind of relationship with Him we also receive a very special kind of relationship with others who follow Him as well. Would you turn with me over to Mark 10?

A young rich man, 'the rich young ruler' as he is called, had come to Jesus and asked what he needed to do in order to receive eternal life. And Jesus told him, give all you have to the poor and follow Me. Now, that was Jesus' instruction to him, not to all of us – it was the hot button issue in that young man's life but the core question was – are you willing to lose all that you have acquired on earth, are you willing to become in Paul's terms, "a prisoner of Christ Jesus?"

[Mark 10:22](#) But he was sad at this word, and went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions.

23 Then Jesus looked around and said to His disciples, "How hard it is for those who have riches to enter the kingdom of God!" 24 And the disciples were astonished at His words. But Jesus answered again and said to them, "Children, how hard it is for those who trust in riches to enter the kingdom of God! 25 It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God." 26 And they were greatly astonished, saying among themselves, "Who then can be saved?" 27 But Jesus looked at them and said, "With men *it is* impossible, but not with God; for with God all things are possible." 28 Then Peter began to say to Him, "See, we have left all and followed You." 29 So Jesus answered and said, "Assuredly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or lands, for My sake and the gospel's, 30 who shall not receive a hundredfold now in this time—houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions—and in the age to come, eternal life. 31 But many *who are* first will be last, and the last first."

What's Jesus saying here? He's telling us what we've already seen play out in Paul's life – that though following Christ may cost you some things, you also gain much, much more. And what you gain isn't just useful and accessible here on earth - it extends forever into eternity. Jesus told the disciples, "Look, if following Me costs you your house or your family or your land here on earth, you're being adopted into a much larger family of God with far more resources than you ever had on your own and they're going to wrap their arms around you and take care of you, and then, when you die, you'll come and live in My house – the one He promised that He was going to prepare for us – forever."

In the first chapters of the book of Acts you see all this starting to play out at the very beginning of the church. After Pentecost thousands upon thousands of people were saved – many of whom had travelled to Jerusalem for the big festival and now they were hearing the name of Jesus and trusting in Him for salvation as Peter and others preached the gospel.

But they weren't from the area and they didn't want to go back home without hearing more. The problem was - none of the New Testament had been written yet, so you couldn't just give these new Christians a Bible and send them on their way, you had to tell them all the stories, so the Christians in Jerusalem took them into their homes and people even began selling stuff so they could feed and support these new Christians who lived so far away and who had no means of supporting themselves locally.

Turn with me over to Acts 2 if you would:

Acts 2: 42 And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers. 43 Then fear came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were done through the apostles. 44 Now all who believed were together, and had all things in common, 45 and sold their possessions and goods, and divided them among all, as anyone had need.

46 So continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart, 47 praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved.

Four things bound these new believers together – we find them in Acts 2:42: the apostle’s doctrine, prayer, the breaking of bread, and this funny Greek word – *koinonia* – fellowship. They were bound together by a sense of community, a sense of fraternity, a sense of family. It was a core part of what God was establishing in the early church, and Paul received its acceptance almost immediately.

Last week we talked about Paul’s conversion on the road to Damascus. He was knocked from his horse by a flash of blinding light and Jesus spoke to him. The experience left Paul temporarily blinded and Jesus told him to go to Damascus where he would be told what to do next. Meanwhile, the Lord also appeared to a man named Ananias, an average Christian, a man we know nothing else about, and told him – go into the city and find Saul, and pray for him that he would receive his sight.

Will you turn with me in your Bibles over to Acts 9 and read with me?

13 Then Ananias answered, “Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much harm he has done to Your saints in Jerusalem. 14 And here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on Your name.”
15 But the Lord said to him, “Go, for he is a chosen vessel of Mine to bear My name before Gentiles, kings, and the children of Israel. 16 For I will show him how many things he must suffer for My name’s sake.”

It’s kind of a rough assignment to accept, isn’t it? I mean, even if you’re SURE God has sent you, this isn’t an easy thing to take on. But,

17 And Ananias went his way and entered the house; and laying his hands on him he said, “Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you came, has sent me that you may receive your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.”
18 Immediately there fell from his eyes *something* like scales, and he received his sight at once; and he arose and was baptized.
19 So when he had received food, he was strengthened. Then Saul spent some days with the disciples at Damascus.

Friends, what are the first two words that we have recorded here from Ananias’ conversation with Saul? He calls him, “Brother Saul.” Ananias had been afraid of Saul because of all he had done in the past. But Jesus said Saul had been changed, that the blood of Christ now covered his sins, and that his life had been set in a new direction. And so, with no trial period whatsoever, without spending any time to get to know Saul or check out whether this change was for real, Ananias immediately accepts him as a brother in Christ and then, Saul is taken in by the Christians in Damascus and spends several days

with them – they feed him, give him a place to stay, and share their stories and lives with him.

Friends, that is radical. That is significant. It's powerful, and it could only happen through the work of God. Instantly Paul's identity is changed. He's no longer viewed as what he once was, he's now seen for what Christ has made him. First thing. Right off the bat. He didn't have to earn this acceptance, didn't have to prove himself or endear himself, he was just instantly accorded this new position as a brother in Christ. Paul lost some things by coming to Christ, absolutely, yes, but he also gained some things as well.

We never read about Paul's immediate family in the Bible. We learn that he had a sister and a nephew who lived in Jerusalem, but we never hear anything about his own wife and children. It's assumed, because of his position with the Sanhedrin, that he must have been married. But nothing is ever recorded about what happened to his wife and he writes later of being single – she may have died, or perhaps left him when he became a Christian. We don't know – we also know nothing about any children he may have had. We know nothing of his mother and father. But time and time again, Paul makes references to his brothers and sisters in Christ. He says Timothy and Onesimus are like sons to him.

And later he would say that we should see the entire church in terms of family. He wrote to Timothy, who was serving as the pastor of a local church and said:

1 Tim 5:1 Do not rebuke an older man, but exhort *him* as a father, younger men as brothers, 2 older women as mothers, younger women as sisters, with all purity.

Friends, we should see people in the church as having value and importance, as having a relationship with us – we should see one another as brother and sisters, fathers and mothers. There shouldn't be any strangers, even if we don't know someone – there should be some sort of concern for one another and even a sense of reverence and respect. It's like being at a big family reunion – you don't know everyone there, but you know you're all related somehow.

Church isn't supposed to be all about me and the people like me, it's a big house full of different kinds of people, and we're all supposed to be living together in harmony just like in an actual home with an actual family – loving, serving, and helping each other.

I did some checking this week and found at least fourteen different men are referred to as Christian "brothers" in the New Testament, and of course, you find references to sisters as well. Again, not biological brothers and sisters, but theological siblings. In the opening chapter of the book of Revelation, which we just finished studying, John introduces himself to the entire church of Christ as "your brother and companion in the tribulation and kingdom and patience of Jesus Christ."

Now, church isn't the only place you can feel fellowship or a strong sense of bonding. I remember being in the Marine Corps – if you were travelling through an airport and saw another Marine in uniform you could start talking immediately, they weren't a stranger –

they were just someone you hadn't met yet and you had plenty to talk about – stories and experiences to swap.

And I remember going to the gym, doing Crossfit. There's an incredible almost humorously cultish aspect of Crossfit because of the sense of community it breeds. And some of you have experienced similar things in fraternities or sororities, or in other groups.

So, brotherhood or fellowship at church is not unique, but I would argue that it is distinct. Distinct because it goes deeper and spreads wider. My fellowship with other Marines is based on what we do in uniform. It doesn't touch my relationship with my mom or how I respond to my failing marriage. In fact, that's why they bring in all kinds of helping agencies to try and help Marines get through the problems they're dealing with – because the Marine Corps, all by itself can't help you with your more personal problems. The Crossfit gym doesn't come with you to work and help you deal with all that you're facing there – in fact, that's why some people look forward to going to the gym – to help get away from everything that's happening at the office – to block it out.

There's only so much help and relief I can find outside of Christ and His church. There's only so much help that even my own biological family can give me. For as good and important as biological families are, according to the Bible the first brothers to walk on earth became a murderer and his victim. Fratricide was the first homicide when Cain killed Abel. How do we fix that?

By coming to Christ.

1 John 4:20 If someone says, "I love God," and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, how can he love God whom he has not seen? 21 And this commandment we have from Him: that he who loves God *must* love his brother also.

It's this same pattern we see repeated time and time again in Scripture – we are to receive love from God and then reflect that love toward others.

Paul even gives us instruction on how to do it in our personal relationships – he says think about what God is like, and then allow that to affect your family:

Eph 5:25 Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her,

Eph 6:1 Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right.

Eph 6:4 ... fathers, do not provoke your children to wrath, but bring them up in the training and admonition of the Lord.

Our deepest joys and most shattering pain often involve family – they're who we experience the most intense moments of life with and who we miss the most during times

of intense joy or sorrow because there is a special bond between families – a uniqueness, an exclusivity, an inside set versus the outside of the rest of the world. Every righteous thing that our heart hungers for is best enjoyed with or affirmed by family.

Next week Paul is going to ask Philemon, his brother in Christ, for something big. But it's all going to be grounded in the fact that they're family.

So before we get there, I wanted to spend this week thinking about what that means. And asking: do you know you're part of the family of God? Are you sure of your place in it? Are you receiving all the benefits that come from your place in this family? And are you showing the love and concern that you ought to have for the rest of your family? I hope you'll consider these things this week, and that you will walk out of here this morning having an even greater appreciation of all that you have in Christ – knowing that you lose some things in process of serving God, but you gain an awful lot as well. God never takes anything good away from you without giving you something better.

Let's pray.