

“Rules for Relationships”
Philemon

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What does it look like when the Spirit of God is at work in relationships? That’s the question we are asking this morning, looking at Colossians 3 and Paul’s letter to Philemon.

Why these two passages together? Because these letters are tied closely together. The man named Philemon, to whom the book of Philemon is addressed, lived in Colossae. Colossae is fairly near to the larger city of Ephesus and we assume that Philemon met Paul in Ephesus and was converted under his ministry. He then returned to Colossae and began to live out his faith. He, in fact, hosted a church in that city.

Philemon seems to have been a wealthy man and like many wealthy men and women in the Roman Empire at the time, he would have been a slave owner. Now, slavery was a bit different in those days. It wasn’t necessarily racially based and slaves had many more rights than what we typically think about with slavery. Nevertheless, they were considered property. And one of those slaves of his is named Onesimus. And Onesimus, it seems, has run away from Philemon and fled to Rome, possibly stealing from Philemon in the process. In Rome, he’s encountered Paul and he’s encountered the Gospel. And the Lord has changed him. So now the Lord has worked through Paul to change the hearts of both Philemon and his former servant, Onesimus.

Onesimus, it seems, is one of those, along with Tychicus, who is carrying this letter to the Colossian church and to his old master Philemon. One letter for public consumption and one for private.

You can imagine the potential conflict. What is a runaway slave, possibly a thief, to do when he is reunited with his master? Having been changed by the power of the Gospel, what does that do to his relationship? And what is a master, having

been changed by the power of the Gospel, to do when his runaway servant returns? These are appropriate questions for us too: What is an employer to do when there's conflict with an employee? What is a business person to do when there's conflict with a partner or an associate? What is a teenage child to do when he or she has difficulty with parents? What is a spouse to do when he or she has been wronged? How does the Gospel change the way we are to relate to each other, especially when there is conflict? Or put another way, *what does it look like when the Spirit of God is at work in relationships?* Well, in a word, it looks like **humility**.

We are going to look at both of these passages and mine them for some principles about humility that we can take home. The Colossians passage gives us some 30 thousand foot ideals, and the letter to Philemon puts these ideals in their practical application.

Let's look at that passage from Colossians first: Colossians 3:18-4:1. In this passage Paul is laying out the ways that Christian households are to relate to each other, and he's paying special attention to the roles that are in place in these houses. Husbands and wives, parents and children, slaves and masters (slaves, or "bondservants" would have been counted as part of a household in the first century). What he is saying here is that Christians are to humbly honor each other according to the roles that they have been given. And each role is called to honor the other. Wives, submit to your husbands. Husbands, love your wives. Children, obey your parents. Parents, don't provoke your children. Slaves, obey your masters. Masters, treat your slaves fairly, understanding that you have a master as well—Jesus. Paul is calling for Christians to humbly honor each other in their relationships by honoring the roles that each of them has been given.

Now, to understand this well, we have to understand two very important concepts: in families, in churches and in society, there is a structure of authority—that's the first thing. There is a structure of authority that God has set up that we don't just get to break or ignore. But that structure does not end here on earth, it extends to Heaven. That second thing is very key. Because what that means is that everyone is called to humility—everyone is called to submission, no matter what your role or authority. Wives are called to submit but husbands are as well. Children are called to submit but parents are too. Workers are called to submit but masters are also. Each one of us, no matter how powerful, is not the ultimate say; Jesus is. We

are called to submit to his rule and ultimate authority. In fact, the reminder that Paul gives here is that in abiding by the roles he has placed us in, we are actually working ultimately for the Lord. By humbly honoring each other according to the roles we have been given, we are honoring Jesus. Because there's an authority structure but it doesn't end on earth. The ultimate authority is Jesus.

Let's spell it out a little with one of these examples. Many of us are married and many of us are either children or parents, but I actually want to talk about that third category—slaves and masters. Again, in the first century Roman society, there were slaves all over the place. Some worked in agriculture and some in labor and some in the home. Many were household servants, many were very well educated. They might be tutors for the children. And their children would probably have grown up alongside the children of the home. Slaves might have owned their own property and could often hold office in society. It was quite different than western, race-based slavery.

We experience this relationship more than we think. If you take out the concept of ownership (which, of course, is a big piece). This arrangement most closely resembles the relationship between employer and employee in our society. Employers have the power to give and take the very livelihood of others. Employees are called to serve their earthly masters -their employers- with honor and humility. How are Christians called to work for good employers? Fervently. In dedication. In faithful service. With humility. To do the very best possible job you can for your employer. And how are Christians called to work for bad employers? The very same way. Because, Paul says, you are not just working for him or her, you are working for Jesus. *Remember, you are working for the Lord in these relationships.*

Furthermore, when the Spirit of God is at work in an employee-employer relationship, it transforms it from one of power and advantage to one of humble service. If our attitude in all relationships is service to Christ, then both employee and employer are called to something radically different than what is commonly expected in our society. Radical humility on *both* sides.

The second principle is this: Humbly recognize God's sovereign and loving work in your relationship. Said another way, humble yourself before the Lord and before

others, knowing that God is at work in you, through this relationship. Or said even another way, when the Spirit of God is at work in us, our hope is that something greater is going on in the midst of our relationships—we are being changed.

Here's where we get to turn back to Philemon. Here's a master and a slave, and one has wronged the other. At the same time, there's something broken about their relationship to begin with—it's the relationship of master and slave. So what do you do? Does the master say, "It's within my legal rights to not only take you back as my property but also to punish you for stealing from me." That, of course, would have been within his rights. Or does Onesimus come to Philemon and say, "Now that we are both Christians, I've realized that slavery is wrong. And you, as a Christian, are morally bound to release me. So it's within my moral rights to be free."

The typical conservative person or the more rules-based person, is going to approach life and relationships like a slave owner—here are the rules and the structure that is in place and here is how you are called to honor that. You owe it to me. Now do so. The typical liberal person, or the more freedom-oriented person, is going to approach it that second way—"here's my personal right to freedom that I'm going to exercise." You owe me freedom. But Paul's encouragement here is neither of these. What he says is radical to the original context and to us. Because what he says to Onesimus is, "go and humble yourself before your master and serve him like the best servant there ever was." And what he says to Philemon is, "take your slave back and forgive him and what's more, free him." He is calling for radical humility from both parties. The conservative person is called to loosen their hold on the rules and the liberal person is called to loosen their hold on freedom. They can both do that because as Paul said in Colossians, *they are both working for the Lord*, but also as he is saying here *because the Lord is working in them*. What they can cling to is not rules or freedom but the work of the Lord in each of them.

Look at Philemon 10-11. Paul says, "I appeal to you (Philemon) for my child Onesimus, whose father I became in my imprisonment. Formerly he was useless to you but now he is indeed useful to you and to me." There is a play on words going on. The name Onesimus means "useful." That's his name. What Paul is saying is that this one called useful became useless to you when he ran away, but now he has

become useful to me as a friend and fellow-worker, and by virtue of our unity in the faith, he is more useful to you than he ever was before. Then look at verses 15 and 16. “For this perhaps is why he was parted from you for a while, that you might have him back forever, no longer as a slave but more than a slave, as a brother—especially to me, but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord.”

What Paul is saying is that in the midst of us humbling ourselves before one another, God is working in and through us to do something amazing. He’s changing our hearts through our relationships.

You can imagine how hard this situation must have been. And many of you have been in, or are in now, situations like this. Situations that are tremendously difficult. Relationships that have severe conflict and where you are having to decide how to respond or how to act. Let me simply encourage you from what the Bible is saying here: When we humble ourselves before the Lord in our relationships, he is at work. Will he work to change the other person? I don’t know. Will he be working to change you? I’m pretty sure about that. We can work for the Lord in relationships—even in the really difficult ones—because we understand that he is at work through our humbling ourselves before him.

Our first two principles of humility in relationships were these: 1) humbly honoring each other according to the roles God has set us in, and 2) humbly recognizing the Lord’s sovereign work in us as we do so. The third is really the motivation for it all. 3) We can humbly forgive each other because forgiveness has been shown to us in Christ. Our attitude is *one of service to Christ*, our hope is that of *Christ’s work in us through the process*, and our motivation is *the forgiveness we have been shown in Christ*.

Look at verses 17-18: “So if you considered me your partner, receive him as you would receive me. If he has wronged you at all, or owes you anything, charge it to my account.” Isn’t that a beautiful picture? Paul is saying, “take him back and if there’s something that is owed, charge it to me, not him.” What a beautiful picture of the Gospel Paul gives us here. This is what Jesus has done for us. For we have run far from the Father. We have offended him in our sin. We have rebelled against him and now there is something that we owe. But Jesus says, “Here Father... take

them back. And if they owe you anything—and what we owe for our sin is the punishment of death—if they owe, charge it to my account. Put their debt on me. In the words of a beautiful hymn, “all her sins were cast on me, and she must and shall go free.” This is what Jesus has done for us. And this is what motivates us to humbly forgive each other. This is what enables us to honor the roles the Lord has placed us in. We’re not looking to get something from people. We already have what we need, so we can look to humbly *serve* those around us. It’s what enables us to be worked on in the process. It’s what enables us to enter into very difficult relationships without having to recoup a debt. Jesus has already paid that debt. We can humble ourselves before each other because Jesus has offered up the ultimate act of humility and taken the very debt we owe.