

Main Idea: In Philemon 4-7 we see a model of a refreshing church member. In this passage Paul commends Philemon for three realities which are vital for us too.

- I. We see gospel-shaped relationships (4-5).
 - A. Philemon had a vibrant relationship with the Lord.
 - B. Philemon had vibrant relationships with the Lord's people.
- II. We see gospel-shaped resources (6).
 - A. To grasp what you have in Christ, you must share it with others.
 - B. To share your faith with others, you must grasp what you have.
- III. We see a gospel-shaped reputation (7).
 - A. Philemon meant much to Paul.
 - B. Philemon meant much to all the saints.

Make It Personal: Churches need refreshing people like Philemon.

1. Because of the gospel, we have them.
2. Because of the gospel, we can become them.
3. Because of the gospel, God gets all the glory from them.

Scripture Reading: Philemon 1-7

"It was the right hook that got him. Pastor Waite might have stood in front of the Communion table trading punches with head deacon Ray Bryson all morning had not Ray's fist caught him on the chin two minutes and fifteen seconds into the fight. Waite went down for the count at the altar where most members of Emmanuel Baptist had first declared their commitment to Christ."

I remember thinking, "No way!" when I first read that account. But it's true, according to Chuck Colson who told the story in his acclaimed book, *The Body*. The incident happened in the New England community of Newton, Mass., on the outskirts of Boston. In fact, two of Pastor Newton's front teeth were knocked so loose that he had trouble eating corn on the cob for the next three summers, and Deacon Bryson's hand was broken in two places.²

But that's not all. Listen to the account:

"Within an instant a majority of the congregation converged on the Communion table, punching or shoving. Many came down the center aisle to help break up the combatants, but remained to fight after their side began to fall behind in the skirmish. The melee soon spilled over to an open space beside the organ."

"Two tenors and a baritone jumped over the wooden railing of the choir loft and began exchanging punches with members from both sides of the aisle. Mary Dahl, the director of the Dorcas Society, threw a hymnal at one of the tenors, but the missile sailed high and wide and splashed down in the baptistery behind the choir. Sharon Carlson had given up on the organ and moved to the piano, where she tried to restore order by playing, "Blest Be the Tie That Binds."³

Yet there's more. The following Wednesday each of the deacons received a notice to appear at the Newton Courthouse for a hearing. Pastor Waite had also been summoned.

** Note: This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church. It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

¹ For a previous development, see the Philemon series at WBC on Sunday evenings in 2003.

² Chuck Colson, *The Body*, p. 91

³ Colson, p. 95.

When the court officer entered, he was recognized as David Goldstein, one of the stars on Temple Beth Shalom's softball team. Members from Emmanuel had played against this man's team in the summer softball league.

For several minutes Goldstein looked over the police description. Then he looked at the tape on Waite's nose, and the cast on Branson's hand.

Finally he spoke, "I know some of you from the softball league... We may have had our differences on the ball diamond, but the cause of religion in our city is at stake here. There must be some way you can settle your dispute among yourselves."

"I'm dismissing the case. No charges will be pressed at this point, but I urge you to work this out within your own church. Your Jesus Christ may allow this sort of thing in His followers, but the Commonwealth of Massachusetts will not permit fistfights as a regular order of church service."

The leadership of Emmanuel Baptist Church filed quietly out to their cars and drove off in different directions. On the back of each car was a bumper sticker declaring, "God Is with US at Emmanuel Baptist Church."⁴

Thankfully, the episode I've just shared is extreme (although Colson says that information is true and based on interviews and research conducted by Mike Murray in Newton, Mass.). But the reality is that churches, and I mean all churches, are made up of sinners, and at times even redeemed sinners do things that cause the onlooking world to shake their heads.

And that of course only reinforces the fact that members of local churches are supposed to be different. Even the world says so, which is why they cry hypocrisy when they see Jesus-followers not acting like Jesus.

But for every story like this (and sadly there are others) that takes your breath away, there are hundreds that refresh the soul. For the Lord who has begun a good work in His people will not stop until He has completed it.

That's why, when you look at the church, you'll find not only occasional problems, but also *the refreshing church member*. That's the title I've chosen for this message, for it's what we find when we open our Bibles to today's text.

In Philemon 4-7 we see a model of a refreshing church member. Paul commends Philemon for three realities, which we'll consider carefully in a moment.

We introduced this letter last week. Philemon was a personal friend to Paul, quite frankly, a breath of fresh air. And Paul needed it, for when he wrote this letter he was imprisoned for the sake of Christ.

Philemon was a spiritual son to Paul, who had apparently led him to Christ (see verse 19). Philemon, who lived in the city of Colosse, was a well-to-do man who happened to have a slave by the name of Onesimus. This Onesimus robbed Philemon and skipped town with the loot.

But in God's providence, Onesimus ended up in Rome. And that's where Paul was at the time, in prison. Can anything good come out of prison? Somehow Onesimus met Paul, and Paul introduced him to Jesus Christ, and Onesimus repented and became a follower of Jesus and a great source of encouragement to Paul.

Then the time came for Onesimus to face up to his past. Every believer must do this, for it's an evidence of true faith. So Paul sent Onesimus back to Philemon, but not empty-handed. He sent along this letter to give instructions to Philemon on how to handle this delicate situation.

⁴ Chuck Colson, *The Body*, p. 97.

We'll see in future studies exactly what Paul wanted Philemon to do with Onesimus. But in the passage before us this morning, Paul expresses in very personal terms just how much Philemon meant to him. There were three things that thrilled Paul about Philemon, which the apostle identifies in verses 4-7. I'm calling them traits of the refreshing church member, and they're all shaped by the gospel.

I. We see gospel-shaped relationships (4-5).

Verse 4, "I always thank my God as I remember you in my prayers."

Paul prayed a lot. His prayers were personal. His prayers were specific.

Did you realize that every letter Paul wrote, with the exception of Galatians, begins with an expression of *thanks*. Paul was constantly thanking God for people, and then telling them so!

Why is that significant in this particular letter? In just a few verses, Paul is going to have to deal with a heavy subject with his spiritual son, Philemon. He won't skirt the issue. It must be faced, both by Onesimus and Philemon.

Perhaps Onesimus was standing there as Paul wrote this letter, and later as Philemon read it. A few lines later in this epistle Paul is going to say some pretty strong things to Philemon. He is going to lay it on the line concerning the subject of forgiveness.

But before he does, he sets a context. He affirms Philemon and expresses his appreciation for his dear brother in Christ.

We would do well to follow suit. How often do you thank God for specific people? And then how often do you tell those people that you thank God for them?

I can't overemphasize the power of encouragement. I keep a file in my office of the encouragement cards and letters people send me. No, we mustn't do ministry simply to please people—God is the only audience that matters—but God uses people to encourage His people to keep on going.

So Paul thanked God for Philemon, and he mentions the reasons in verse 5, "Because I hear about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints." So Philemon was a breath of fresh air to Paul because, first of all, he had gospel-shaped relationships.

You says, "What do you mean by gospel-shaped? I don't even see the word *gospel* in this verse." Good question. No, you don't see *gospel* in this verse, but it undergirds every verse Paul ever wrote.

The gospel is the basis for change, the incentive for change, the model for change, for every believer in every situation. The gospel is the message of what God has done for us. It's the good news regarding Jesus, His work on the cross, and His triumph over sin, death, and the devil.

It's this work that God had done that now shaped Philemon's relationships. And Paul saw it. Or, to be technical, *heard* it.

Paul says he had *heard* a report about Philemon. From whom? Quite possibly from Epaphras (a minister in Colosse who relayed to Paul what was happening in the churches in that area; Col 1:4, 7). And I wouldn't be surprised if Onesimus himself had shared some things with Paul about his master.

When you are a refreshing church member, word gets around. In this case, Paul commended Philemon for two relationships.

A. Philemon had a vibrant relationship with the Lord.

Here's how the KJV renders verse 5, "Hearing of thy love and faith, which thou hast toward the Lord Jesus, and toward all saints." The KJV presents the words in the order in which they appear in the Greek text. But the literal order leaves some interpretation issues for us to make. Actually, the structure of verse 5 is what Bible scholars call a "chiasm."

In this Greek chiasm there are four items (love and faith, Jesus and saints). The first item mentioned goes with the last item, and the second item with the third. There's symmetry here. So in this sentence, "love" goes with "all the saints," and "faith" goes with "the Lord Jesus." In other words, Philemon exhibited faith in the Lord Jesus and love toward all the saints. That's why the NIV translates the verse, "Because I hear about your *faith in the Lord Jesus* and your *love for all the saints*."

The point is, Paul had heard that Philemon's vertical relationship with the Lord was in order, and so were his horizontal relationships with people. The former is the key to the latter. Indeed, the former will lead to the latter, or the former is in question.

That's why I want to say this to our young people. Do you want to have a strong marriage some day? Then make sure you date and marry someone who puts the Lord Jesus *first* in their life and in your relationship.

The qualities "love" and "faith" are the hallmarks of the Christian life. Philemon had them both.

First of all, Paul said he heard reports about "your faith in the Lord Jesus." Think about that. Philemon was known for his vibrant relationship with the Lord. Word had spread around about his "faith toward the Lord."

I don't think Paul has in mind simply Philemon's saving faith here, but particularly his daily living faith. God expects His people to walk by faith, not by sight. Philemon did. The Lord Jesus was real in his life. He placed his confidence in Jesus the Lord. He trusted in Jesus the Lord, for his daily needs and challenges.

How could he not? He was once under the wrath of God, guilty of transgressing God's law. But then God informed him that He had provided a way of pardon. *Through Jesus*. God sent His own Son into the world, Jesus the Messiah, who performed a rescue operation. Jesus came as man's substitute. Jesus kept the divine law perfectly, and then died in the place of those who had violated the divine law. On the cross, Jesus took the penalty for their transgressions. And God accepted Jesus' payment, as evidenced by what He did on third day, when He raised Jesus from the dead.

So yes, how could it not be? How could Philemon *not* have a vibrant relationship with the Lord Jesus, the One who loved him and rescued him?!

But it didn't stop there. It never does, if it's real. First, a vibrant relationship with the Lord. Second...

B. Philemon had vibrant relationships with the Lord's people.

Notice verse 5 again, "Because I hear about your faith in the Lord Jesus *and your love for all the saints*." Do you know what faith in Christ produces? Love for the saints. Again, a lack of love indicates a deficient faith.

James 2:1 "My brothers, as believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ, don't show favoritism. Or as the KJV puts it, "My brethren, have not the faith of our Lord...with respect of persons."

James 2:17 "In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead." The AV says, "...is dead, being alone."

There were no loopholes in Philemon's life. His faith in the Lord Jesus was backed up by his love toward the saints. "All" of them. Paul will have more to say in a moment about Philemon's relationships with people.

By the way, can you see where Paul is going with this thought? Since Philemon "loved all the saints," he could surely include Onesimus, his runaway slave who had recently become a saint!

No wonder Philemon was such a breath of fresh air to Paul. And a refreshing church member for us to consider. First, because of his gospel-shaped relationships.

II. We see gospel-shaped resources (6).

In verse 6 Paul tells Philemon what he prayed for him. "I pray that you may be active in sharing your faith, so that you will have a full understanding of every good thing we have in Christ."

If you have the AV, you'll notice verse 6 begins with "that." It shows that Paul is about to identify his purpose as he interceded for his friend. Here's what he prayed (AV), "That the communication [Schofield uses the term "fellowship"] of thy faith may become effectual by the acknowledging of every good thing which is in you in Christ Jesus."

Let me say up front, it is very difficult to know precisely what Paul had in mind when he penned this verse. In fact, it's very difficult even to translate it. There are two main clauses in the verse:

Clause #1: In the KJV again, "That the communication of thy faith may become effectual." Typically, the KJV gives the more literal word for word rendering of a Greek text, and then leaves the interpretation to the reader. In this case it causes us to ask, "What did Paul mean by 'the communication of thy faith' in reference to Philemon?"

The word "communication" is *koinonia*. It can mean "sharing" or "fellowship" [which the Schofield Bible used]. But what does it mean here? It seems to refer to verbal activity, as the NIV indicates. Paul is praying that Philemon will share something with his mouth.

But not just share it any old way. He says, "I pray that you may be *active* in sharing your faith." The word is *energes* and means "to be at work" or "active." The KJV uses the term "effectual."

Next, we must notice the pronoun. It's actually singular ("the fellowship of **thy** faith"). Paul is talking directly to Philemon here. Paul wanted Philemon to be active in sharing something. What?

"Your faith," he says.

What does that mean? The next verse informs us that Philemon had a reputation for helping people in need. He shared with them. He shared, not just in word, but in deed. What then was Paul's prayer request for Philemon? That he would be even more active in sharing his faith with others.

But why? Something happens when we share our faith. That brings us to clause #2...

Clause #2: In the NIV, "So that you will have a full understanding of every good thing we have in Christ." The KJV takes a different slant by saying, "By the acknowledging of every good thing which is in you in Christ Jesus."

There's a vital connection between these two clauses. When we share our faith, when we get involved in passing on to others what Christ has given us, something happens.

You say, "Yes, the other can receive Christ."

And that's true, but that's not Paul's point here. Something else happens we share our faith, namely, we get a fuller understanding of something. We begin to "acknowledge" something.

And what's that? The good things we have in Christ.

The phrase "have a full understanding" [KJV "acknowledge"] means "to recognize, to know." Paul's not talking about mere "head" knowledge here, just acquiring more information. This word stresses "knowing" something so that it influences your life.

So think about what Paul is saying. He wanted Philemon to grasp every good thing which he possessed in Christ, for indeed, Philemon had great resources. And so do you, if you are in Christ. Every spiritual blessing in heavenly places is available to you (Eph 1:3), so you are a spiritual billionaire.

But who is the person who taps into those resources? This is so basic, yet critical to see.

A. To grasp what you have in Christ, you must share it with others. And yet...

B. To share your faith with others, you must grasp what you have.

It goes both ways. Again, to appreciate what you have you must share it with others. But to be able to share your faith with others you must grasp what you have. Both are true.⁵

I'll make a personal observation. Do you know when God's Word really comes alive to me, when the riches I have in Christ become most precious to my soul? It's when I'm actively involved sharing my faith in Christ with others.

E.g.

So what does verse 6 indicate will happen if we are *not* sharing our faith with others? We won't appreciate the good things we have in Christ. And if that happens, we'll start becoming self-reliant, which leads to pride, which then leads to frustration. And eventually we'll begin to complain and become disillusioned with our Christian experience.

Dawson Trotman, the founder of the *Navigators*, said it well. "Spiritually speaking, we were born to reproduce."

But if we're not reproducing spiritually, we're in trouble. And it's not just that we won't see other people get saved. Again, it's that we ourselves will stop appreciating what we have.

Verse 6 reveals a tremendous key to the abundant Christian life. Do you want the fullest experience of what God intends for you? Then here's where it starts.

1. Determine that you're going to dig into the Word.
2. Affirm what you have in Christ.
3. Share it with others.
4. As you do, you'll discover even more resources that are yours in Christ.

And the process never stops in this life. Philemon had great resources, and therefore exhibited a vibrant faith and love. Yet Paul prayed that he would become even more effectual, the result of sharing what he had with others.

Of course, his most pressing opportunity stood right in front of him. *Onesimus*. What's he going to do with this man who so wronged him? I pray you will be active in

⁵ Here's how the NASB translates the verse, "And I pray that the fellowship of your faith may become effective through the knowledge of every good thing which is in you."

sharing your faith. Do that, Philemon, and you'll know even more fully every good thing you have in Christ.

Those are the traits of a refreshing church member. First, gospel-shaped relationships, first with the Lord, and then with His people. Next, gospel-shaped resources that we share with others, and thus become more precious to us every day. One more...

III. We see a gospel-shaped reputation (7).

Verse 7, "Your love has given me great joy and encouragement, because you, brother, have refreshed the hearts of the saints."

Now there's a reputation worth talking about! Paul says Philemon was a great source of great joy and encouragement. But do you know what really thrilled Paul about Philemon? It wasn't just what Philemon did for *Paul*. He did it for everybody else, too.

"You, brother, have refreshed the hearts of the saints."

So a double reputation. First...

A. Philemon meant much to Paul. But everybody has their fan club. Yet...

B. Philemon meant much to all the saints. It was the standard response, whether talking to one of the teens, or a slave, or a businessman, or a widow in the church. "You want to know about Philemon? I like being around that man. He's so refreshing!"

Look at two significant words here.

"**hearts**"--The Greek word is not the usual word for heart (*kardia*). Rather it's the word *splagchna*, which refers to the inner parts of a person (the heart, liver, lungs, bowels). It's a graphic figure of speech. It's a deep emotional term. Philemon touched people right here (in their "innings"). He was someone that God used to meet the deep, inner emotional needs of the saints.

How so? Notice the second word.

"**refreshed**"—Jesus used the same word in Matthew 11:28. "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you *rest*."⁶ The term means "to give rest from labor." That's what Jesus was offering to weary, oppressed people. "Come to me, and I will REFRESH you."

Now watch the connection. How does Jesus refresh people today? One of the primary ways Jesus refreshes people is *through His people*.

Like Philemon. Philemon had a wonderful reputation. He was a breath of fresh air to people. He encouraged people. He built people up. When Philemon walked into a room, people liked having him around.

I don't think that means he failed to confront sin, but he wasn't a critic. He didn't badmouth. He didn't nag and scold and complain. He didn't tear people down. He refreshed.

And he refreshed, specifically, the *hearts* of the saints. So he didn't just put a smile on people's faces. His influence went far deeper. His presence renewed their hearts. People loved the Lord and each other and the lost more when they spent time with Philemon.

Churches need people like Philemon.

⁶ KJV "Come unto Me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you REST."

What kind of influence do you have on your brothers and sisters in this church? Do you refresh them? Would they say the Lord is using you to help them love Him, and each another, and the lost more?

Years ago one of the guys I lived with in college was a negative sort of guy.

“It’s exciting to see what the Lord is doing!” To which he would say something like, “Yea, but I bet it doesn’t last.”

It’s not very refreshing to be around someone like that. On the other hand, I think of so many people God has placed in my life who were *refreshing*. Like another roommate I had in college, my good friend Rick who went to be with the Lord two years ago. We played sports together in high school, prayed for our future families together as freshman in college, stood beside each other in our weddings, and trained church leaders together in Ukraine. Rick used to call me and say, “Hey, let’s meet halfway for lunch in Chillicothe!” I’m thankful for how God used that man to refresh my soul.

Galatians 6:10 says, “Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers.”

I began this message with a story about a fight at a church in Massachusetts. We finish by thinking about Philemon, a man who went down in history with the reputation of being a refresher!

Make It Personal: Churches need refreshing people like Philemon.

It’s that simple. Churches need people who refresh like Philemon did. WBC needs people who refresh others like Philemon did. And because of the gospel, I have three pieces of good news to share with you.

1. Because of the gospel, we have them.

This church is filled with people just like Philemon. People with gospel-shaped relationships, with the Lord first, and then with each other. People with gospel-shaped resources, who indeed are sharing them with others and in so doing growing in their appreciation for them. And people with gospel-shaped reputations, not just with a few friends, but with all who know them.

2. Because of the gospel, we can become them.

People who refresh are just like everyone else, by nature selfish, self-focused, prone to be critical and small minded. But the gospel that saved them is also changing them. When they consider what the Holy God has done for them, how He rescued them and pardoned them and adopted them into His family, all on the basis of what Jesus did on the cross, they now resolve to resemble their gracious Father in the way they treat others.

Sinners who have been refreshed by God have all the incentive they need to refresh other sinners. And all the power they need too.

We’ve talked today about the refreshing church member. Because of the gospel each person in this room can become one. To be a church member, you must first put your trust in Christ and make that public through baptism. Have you? If not, I invite you to do so. Come to Christ, and then commit yourself to a local church.

But don’t stop there. By God’s grace, be a *refreshing* church member.

3. Because of the gospel, God gets all the glory from them.

Note: Following sermon, Pastor Matt Wilson to read letter to congregation