

Main Idea: As we begin our study of Philemon, let's consider 2 things.

I. Let's consider the people involved in Philemon.

Key: We don't go to church. We are the church.

II. Let's consider the purpose of Philemon.

A. The intent of the letter exalts Christ.

Key: If we are Christians then we ought to respond to situations differently than others do, in fact, than *we used to* before God saved us.

B. The illustration in the letter exalts Christ.

Key Verse (18): “If he has done you any wrong or owes you anything, charge it to me.”

Response: What are some lessons we can learn from this?

1. Problems are opportunities for God to change lives.
2. Problems are opportunities for us to follow in the steps of Jesus.
3. Problems are opportunities for us to get involved in each other's lives.
4. Problems are opportunities for God to put the gospel on display.

*Scripture Reading: 2 Corinthians 5:11-21*

There was a man who lived many years ago. He was a well to do business owner. He was also a Christian. In fact, not just a nominal Christian, but a committed follower of Jesus who willingly opened up his house every week for ministry. This wealthy man had a family business of sorts. He also had a man working for him who was a, well, let's call him an apprentice.

One day, the owner went to work to open shop. When he got there, he could tell something was wrong. He went to the safe, hidden in the back, and opened it. It was empty, the profits from the week gone. Only a few people knew the combination to that safe. The apprentice was one of them. The owner waited for the apprentice to come to work that day. He waited in vain because, you guessed it, the fellow never showed up. He couldn't believe it. He'd been robbed by his own worker. And no doubt, the apprentice had skipped the country, never to be seen again.

Many months later, this same business owner received a letter. He looked at the return address, and was delighted. It was from a close friend of his, in fact, it was from the man who had led him to Christ. As he opened the letter, he thought about the good times they'd had in the past. They'd even served together once on a short term missionary project.

The first line of the letter shook the business owner to the core. His friend was in prison. He'd been arrested because of his involvement in preaching the gospel of Christ.

But that wasn't all. As his eyes moved through the letter, he couldn't believe what he saw. It couldn't be! Guess who his friend had met? While incarcerated hundreds of miles away, in the midst of the teeming large capital city, like a needle in a haystack, his friend had a visitor. Guess who? The apprentice, the one who had robbed him!

Remarkable? Wait until you hear the rest! Guess what had happened to this apprentice? During their prison visit, the friend told the apprentice about Jesus Christ. He let him know that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, had come to earth as the God-man, lived a perfect life, died in the place of sinners on a cross, and then rose from the dead. He told him that because of Jesus, God would forgive him and deliver him from his sinful life. If he would repent of his sins and put his trust in Jesus.

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\*\* 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.

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

Which, by God's grace, he did! Right there, the runaway apprentice cried out to God and received Jesus Christ as his Savior and Lord! It was no "fire insurance" conversion either. It literally changed his life, so much so that this once self-absorbed man began to serve other people. In fact, he became a useful participant in a developing prison ministry.

I love that story. I love it because it shows us that no one is too far gone for Jesus, the loving Savior. Which is why we're going to investigate that story carefully for the next month or so.

This, of course, isn't simply a true story, it's a story you hold in your lap. It's found in your Bible (though I embellished it a little to fill in the gaps).

This morning, we're going to begin a series examining this one chapter epistle that Paul wrote to Philemon. It's a heart warming book. Very personal, even a little sentimental. And quite convicting at times, particularly as we ponder how Paul told his friend to treat the apprentice who had robbed him, and consider the implications for how we are to treat those who have wronged us.

It's a story that makes the point loud and clear, God specializes in turning our problems (indeed, our problem people) into opportunities to put His gospel glory on display.

#### The Characters in Philemon:

Paul--author of letter (along with Timothy)

Onesimus--runaway slave

Philemon--the owner of the slave

Apphia--wife of Philemon?

Archippus--son of Philemon? Pastor of church?

Tychicus--delivered this letter and Colossians

Epaphras, Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, Luke--ministry associates of Paul (23-24)

Philemon is a great book. One of the gripping themes in the book is the theme of forgiveness. Can you imagine how Philemon must have felt the first time his eyes met the eyes of his converted, runaway slave Onesimus? Do you think it was difficult for him to forgive? Do you think he wrestled with the painful memories of what he had done to him?

So today, let's jump into the book. As we look at the first three verses of Philemon this morning, let's consider two things.

I. The People involved in Philemon

II. The Purpose of Philemon

#### I. Let's consider the people involved in Philemon.

Verse 1 "Paul a prisoner of Jesus Christ"

Paul wrote the letter. Typically, Paul began his epistles by identifying himself as "an apostle." But not here. What title does he use? Verse 1, "a prisoner."

Paul was in prison. Quite likely, he wrote the letter from Rome, during his first imprisonment in the capital city. If that was the case, it was the summer of 62 AD.<sup>2</sup> During that imprisonment, he also wrote the prison epistles of Ephesians, Philippians, and Colossians. It seems that Colossians and Philemon were both delivered by Tychicus.

Please note that according to verse 1, Timothy was with Paul. Timothy was a great second man. Throughout the NT, you see Paul doing the talking, taking the lead,

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<sup>2</sup> He died in 67 or 68 AD.

while Timothy was the support man. It can be tough to play second fiddle, but Timothy did it well, enabled by grace. And then he took the baton, as we saw in our recent study of 2 Timothy.

Who received this letter? Paul mentions four recipients...

### **1. Philemon**

Verse 1 "To Philemon, our dear friend and fellowworker"

Who was Philemon? Apparently, he was a well-to-do business owner in the city of Colossae. It appears he had money. How do we know that? One, he had at least one slave. And two, he had a house large enough so that the church met there (2).

Notice how Paul referred to Philemon--"our dearly beloved [KJV]." Why was he so dear to Paul? We find out by a passing comment in verse 19, "Not to mention that you owe me your very self."

Apparently Paul had led Philemon to Christ. Since we know that Paul had not personally evangelized in Colossae, scholars feel that Paul had met Philemon while ministering in Ephesus (Acts 19:31). Philemon was converted to Christ by Paul.

Isn't it interesting that a man like Paul would describe another man like Philemon by such an affectionate term as "dear friend" or "dearly beloved." And why was that? These two men had a great appreciation for each other. And Paul wasn't afraid or ashamed to express it.

That's a mark of a real man, that is, God's kind of man.

How else did Paul describe Philemon? Verse 1, "our fellow worker"

Philemon was a colleague of Paul. Paul disciplined him, and recruited him for ministry, possibly during his three year stint in Ephesus.

There's no speed course for discipling people. It takes time and an investment of personal energy. Who do you have in your life right now that you are seeking to disciple? Who are you inviting to your home, and visiting in their home, and opening the Scriptures with, and praying with, and modeling Christ with?

Who else received the letter? Paul mentions...

### **2. Apphia**

Who was she? We're not sure. Possibly Philemon's wife. It's the only place her name appears in the NT. Paul also describes her as "beloved" [in the KJV] and "our sister" in the NIV.

### **3. Archippus**

His name, interestingly, means "horseruler." If Apphia was Philemon's wife, it's possible that Archippus was their son. His name also appears in Colossians 4:17, where we are informed that Archippus was involved in the ministry (as a pastor?) in either Colossae or Laodicea.

Paul reserved a special title for Archippus--"fellow soldier." The only other person Paul complimented with that term was Epaphroditus in Philippians 2:25. Apparently, Archippus was a committed, dependable, go-getter in the ministry. Paul viewed him as a spiritual comrade in army of Christ.

Let me repeat an observation I've made before. Paul had relationships with a lot of people. He mentions some 100 people by name in his letters. Is that significant? Yes!

What does that say to us about the Christian life as God intends? This is key. Relationships are important. That's true in life in general and in ministry in particular. We need people. People need us. God has purposed to work through people to reach people with the amazing good news of His Son, Jesus Christ.

Think of the people God has used in your life. Parents. Sunday School teachers. Pastors. Friends. A host of people, and in a host of ways.

One person God has used in my life was Dick Walker. I never talked theology with Dick, that I recall, but God used him to shape my theological development. When I was about twenty, Dick Walker was the Dean of Men at Cedarville College. Dick went out of his way to set up opportunities for young men like me to be exposed to some very influential, godly leaders. He would get Schuller's donuts and schedule a breakfast meeting for about ten of us to meet with men like Warren Wiersbe, Joe Stowell, Wendell Kempton, and others. Dick helped shape my future leadership by being a facilitator and encourager.

Yes, there are lots of ways God can use us to shape the people He places in our lives, for His kingdom purposes. But we must make the investment.

Now I want you to notice something unusual about the letter of Philemon. We've already seen that it was a personal letter, received by Philemon, Apphia, and Archippus. But it was also an *open letter*. Notice who else Paul had in mind when he wrote...

#### **4. The House Church**

Verse 2 "And to the church that meets in your home." There were no church buildings in the first century. The Christians met in houses. In this case, they met in Philemon's house.

Chuck Colson points out a critical fact in his book *The Body*. We need a constant reminder. The church of Jesus Christ is not a building. The church is people. But what do we often say? Things like...

"Where do you GO to church?" Or, "I'm GOING to go to church this Sunday." Or, "Isn't that a pretty church on the corner of Gallia and South?"

This is not mere semantics. **We don't go to church. We are the church.**

The local church known as Wheelersburg Baptist Church happens to be meeting in this auditorium this morning. Twenty-five years ago it was meeting in the gym (we'll be celebrating our 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary November 8). For the 100 years before that Wheelersburg Baptist Church met in a white framed facility. But a building is not a church. And a building does not make a church.

When Paul wrote that this letter was intended for "the church that meets in your home," he was saying that this was an open letter for all the Christians that assembled there (and then, by extension, for us too).

This is key. What Paul had to say to Philemon, about how to treat Onesimus, applied to the rest of the church, too. Including us.

Do you have any fellow Christians in your life that have hurt you, and are you wondering how you should treat them? You're about to see the answer in Philemon.

Next came Paul's standard greeting...

Verse 3 "Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ."

This was actually a standard way of opening a first century letter. But it's far more than a formality. Paul begins by communicates a blessing, a pronouncement that highlights the fundamental tenets of Christianity:

**Grace**—We believe in grace. We are saved by grace alone. We live by grace alone. Not our merit. Not our worth. We're dependent upon grace.

**To You**—grace is available to people; and it is experienced by specific people, namely to those who are in Christ.

**And peace**--The great product of Christianity, peace with God. Those who are in Christ experience what the lost world longs for, peace with God, and the capacity for peace with our fellow human beings.

**From God our Father**—Paul affirms the fatherhood of God. He is the source of grace and peace.

But answer this. Is God the Father of all men? No. All men and women exist because He gave them life, but only those who have received Christ have been *born again* and thus are the sons of God (John 1:12). Those who are outside of Christ are outside of God's family, and indeed are the children of the devil (John 8:44).

**And the Lord Jesus Christ**—Jesus Christ is *Lord*. His Lordship is not just an impressive title. The Lordship of Jesus Christ is a reality that must affect every area of our lives, if not in this life then surely when we stand before Him at the judgment. In Philemon's case, the way he treated a runaway slave must reflect Christ's Lordship. If He is our Lord, then we must do what will please Him. We belong to Him. We exist for Him.

Take a moment to reflect on that reality. Does your life reflect a commitment to the Lordship of Jesus Christ? Are you joyfully living in submission to Him in every known area of your life? Take inventory. Is there any aspiration, or thought, or attitude or action that displeases Him? Is there anything that He is wanting you to do that you are refusing to do?

You say, "Yes, but I don't have the strength to do what needs to happen." But wait. You do, if you know Christ. *Grace to you and peace*. That's what you have, the unmerited help of God the Father extended to you through the Lord Jesus Christ.

So there are the people of Philemon. Now let's consider...

## II. Let's consider the purpose of Philemon.

This is a Christ-exalting letter, and it does so in two very powerful ways.

### **A. The intent of the letter exalts Christ.**

Why did Paul write this letter? Obviously the primary issue at hand was to give instruction on a first century Christian, and his family, and his church family should treat a fugitive slave by the name of Onesimus.

Philemon had a dilemma on his hands. In his day, Roman law permitted slave owners to execute a rebellious slave. In fact, owners were encouraged to do so, for the simple fact that there were 60,000,000 slaves in the Roman empire and slave holders had to be on constant guard against the danger of revolt. So if a slave ran away, at best he was branded with a red-hot iron on his forehead, with the letter "F" (standing for "fugitivus," that is, runaway). Or at worst, he was crucified.

It was a matter of raw business. Economics. Profit.

But Philemon was a Christian. What should *he* do with Onesimus? If he forgave him, what would the other masters and slaves think? If he punished him, how would it affect his testimony and his relationship with Onesimus as a brother in Christ?

That was the intent of Paul's letter, to tell Philemon how to handle this situation in a way that would honor the Lord Jesus Christ.

Perhaps it goes without saying, but the intent of this letter urges us to say it.

**Key: If we are Christians then we ought to respond to situations differently than others do, in fact, than *we used to* before God saved us.**

I ought to be a different person on the job, in the home, playing sports, coaching sports, when spending time with friends, in *every* area of my life, than I was prior to

conversion. And why is that the case? Because Jesus Christ, the One who died to rescue me from my sin and the eternal punishment in hell that my sin deserves, is now my Lord.

That's what this letter is all about, urging one man to choose the Christ-honoring response in a very difficult situation. Rather than going with the crowd and doing what the other masters might have done, he must choose to please Christ. And Paul wrote this letter to help him know what exactly would please Christ.

And to state another very basic reality that this letter hightights, that's what the church is all about. We're supposed to help each other make decisions that will please our Master.

"In the multitude of counselors there is wisdom," Proverbs 15:22 says. And if we're going to help each other, we need to know each other. And if we're to know each other we must spend time with each other, meaningful time building into each other in ways that result in God being glorified in and through our lives.

Again, if we treat church merely as a place we *go*, that won't happen. But once we grasp that church is who we *are*, then we'll never view a conflict with a brother, or anything else, the same way again.

I'm so thankful for the privilege to do life in the context of this local church. It's a wonderful gift from the Lord, not because this church is problem free, but because this church is the Lord's. That's why we're called to love it, and invest in it, and live life while connected to it.

There's something else that exalts Christ in Philemon. First, the intent.

### **B. The illustration in the letter exalts Christ.**

Although Paul's primary intent for writing the letter had to do with human forgiveness, this epistle offers us a marvelous illustration of divine forgiveness. Look at verse 18.

**Key Verse (18): "If he has done you any wrong or owes you anything, charge it to me."** Here's the KJV rendering, "If he hath wronged thee, or oweth thee anything, put that on my account."

Yes, Onesimus was a felon, a man guilty of two crimes. First, the word "wronged" deals with a legal injustice. Onesimus had broken the law by running away from his master. And secondly, the word "owes" implies financial loss through theft. Onesimus was both a fugitive and a thief. His guilt could not be denied.

So what did Paul ask Philemon to do? Pretend the crimes never occurred? No. Instead, notice what he said.

"Put that to my account." That's what he told Philemon. It's an imperative. The word is a technical, business term, and by using it Paul in essence is saying, "I will take care of his debt." The debt could not be ignored. Justice demanded that it be paid.

But love moved Paul to become a substitute. "Put that to my accoun."

In verse 17 he said, "So if you consider me a partner, welcome him as you would welcome me." Now he says, "Charge it to me."

What a great illustration of the divine pardon! We owed a debt we could not pay. We had run away from God. We robbed Him of the glory He deserved. His justice demanded that we be punished.

But what did He do? He sent His Son into the world on a mission. Jesus the Christ stepped into our shoes, went to the cross, and in essence said, "Put that to my account. Charge it to me."

Romans 5:8 "But God commended His love toward us in this. Christ died FOR US."

2 Corinthians 5:21 "For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin FOR US..."

Jesus Christ took care of our sin. Jesus Christ took care of our guilt. Jesus Christ took care of our penalty. Jesus Christ took care of our debt. In our behalf, He said, "Put that to my account."

And was His payment sufficient? The answer is critical, and His final words on the cross provide the answer. "It is finished (John 19:30)." The Greek word is *tetelestai*, a business term that means "to discharge a debt, to pay in full."

When Jesus died on the cross, a transaction occurred. Theologically, that transaction is called imputation. Our sins were imputed to Him. His righteousness was imputed to us. Our debt was charged to His account. His riches were deposited to ours.

It's this reality that fueled Paul's exhortation to Philemon. Remember what He did for us, brother, and put it on display by what you now do with Onesimus.

Martin Luther once said, "All of us are Onesimuses!"<sup>3</sup> And he was right.

There are some very practical lessons we need to ponder. But first, I want to share a modern day illustration that will help us see how relevant the message of Philemon is.

The week before last I had the privilege to hear Rosaria Butterfield speak at the ACBC annual conference. Rosaria was a tenured English professor at Syracuse University, a lesbian activist who despised Christians, who became a Christ-follower by the power of the gospel.

I'd like for Rosaria to share her story with us, so I want to read the article she wrote for *Christianity Today*, February 7, 2013. It's entitled, "My Train Wreck Conversion."<sup>4</sup>

The word Jesus stuck in my throat like an elephant tusk; no matter how hard I choked, I couldn't hack it out. Those who professed the name commanded my pity and wrath. As a university professor, I tired of students who seemed to believe that "knowing Jesus" meant knowing little else. Christians in particular were bad readers, always seizing opportunities to insert a Bible verse into a conversation with the same point as a punctuation mark: to end it rather than deepen it.

Stupid. Pointless. Menacing. That's what I thought of Christians and their god Jesus, who in paintings looked as powerful as a Breck Shampoo commercial model.

As a professor of English and women's studies, on the track to becoming a tenured radical, I cared about morality, justice, and compassion. Fervent for the worldviews of Freud, Hegel, Marx, and Darwin, I strove to stand with the disempowered. I valued morality...

After my tenure book was published, I used my post to advance the understandable allegiances of a leftist lesbian professor. My life was happy, meaningful, and full. My partner and I shared many vital interests: aids activism, children's health and literacy, Golden Retriever rescue, our Unitarian Universalist church, to name a few... It was hard to argue that my partner and I were anything but good citizens and caregivers. The GLBT community values hospitality and applies it with skill, sacrifice, and integrity.

I began researching the Religious Right and their politics of hatred against queers like me. To do this, I would need to read the one book that had, in my estimation, gotten so many people off track: the Bible. While on the lookout for

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<sup>3</sup> In Wiersbe, 270.

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2013/january-february/my-train-wreck-conversion.html?start=1>

some Bible scholar to aid me in my research, I launched my first attack on the unholy trinity of Jesus, Republican politics, and patriarchy, in the form of an article in the local newspaper about Promise Keepers. It was 1997.

The article generated many rejoinders, so many that I kept a Xerox box on each side of my desk: one for hate mail, one for fan mail. But one letter I received defied my filing system. It was from the pastor of the Syracuse Reformed Presbyterian Church. It was a kind and inquiring letter. Ken Smith encouraged me to explore the kind of questions I admire: How did you arrive at your interpretations? How do you know you are right? Do you believe in God? Ken didn't argue with my article; rather, he asked me to defend the presuppositions that undergirded it. I didn't know how to respond to it, so I threw it away.

Later that night, I fished it out of the recycling bin and put it back on my desk, where it stared at me for a week, confronting me with the worldview divide that demanded a response. As a postmodern intellectual, I operated from a historical materialist worldview, but Christianity is a supernatural worldview. Ken's letter punctured the integrity of my research project without him knowing it.

With the letter, Ken initiated two years of bringing the church to me, a heathen. Oh, I had seen my share of Bible verses on placards at Gay Pride marches. That Christians who mocked me on Gay Pride Day were happy that I and everyone I loved were going to hell was clear as blue sky. That is not what Ken did. He did not mock. He engaged. So when his letter invited me to get together for dinner, I accepted. My motives at the time were straightforward: Surely this will be good for my research.

Something else happened. Ken and his wife, Floy, and I became friends. They entered my world. They met my friends. We did book exchanges. We talked openly about sexuality and politics. They did not act as if such conversations were polluting them. They did not treat me like a blank slate. When we ate together, Ken prayed in a way I had never heard before. His prayers were intimate. Vulnerable. He repented of his sin in front of me. He thanked God for all things. Ken's God was holy and firm, yet full of mercy. And because Ken and Floy did not invite me to church, I knew it was safe to be friends.

I started reading the Bible. I read the way a glutton devours. I read it many times that first year in multiple translations. At a dinner gathering my partner and I were hosting, my transgendered friend J cornered me in the kitchen. She put her large hand over mine. "This Bible reading is changing you, Rosaria," she warned.

With tremors, I whispered, "J, what if it is true? What if Jesus is a real and risen Lord? What if we are all in trouble?"

J exhaled deeply. "Rosaria," she said, "I was a Presbyterian minister for 15 years. I prayed that God would heal me, but he didn't. If you want, I will pray for you."

I continued reading the Bible, all the while fighting the idea that it was inspired. But the Bible got to be bigger inside me than I. It overflowed into my world. I fought against it with all my might. Then, one Sunday morning, I rose from the bed of my lesbian lover, and an hour later sat in a pew at the Syracuse Reformed Presbyterian Church. Conspicuous with my butch haircut, I reminded myself that I came to meet God, not fit in. The image that came in like waves, of me and everyone I loved suffering in hell, vomited into my consciousness and gripped me in its teeth.



I fought with everything I had.

I did not want this.

I did not ask for this.

I counted the costs. And I did not like the math on the other side of the equal sign.

But God's promises rolled in like sets of waves into my world. One Lord's Day, Ken preached on John 7:17: "If anyone wills to do [God's] will, he shall know concerning the doctrine" (NKJV). This verse exposed the quicksand in which my feet were stuck. I was a thinker. I was paid to read books and write about them. I expected that in all areas of life, understanding came before obedience. And I wanted God to show me, on my terms, why homosexuality was a sin. I wanted to be the judge, not one being judged.

Okay, let's talk about four lessons from Philemon.

Response: What are some lessons we can learn from this?

*1. Problems are opportunities for God to change lives.*

Philemon's slave ran away. A bad thing? Yes, from one perspective. But God used it to take Onesimus to Rome where he ultimately was saved and eventually reconciled to his estranged boss.

A lesbian becomes a professor in your city. A problem? Not for a pastor and his wife who had the eyes of Christ.

*2. Problems are opportunities for us to follow in the steps of Jesus.*

That's what Philemon had, an opportunity to do with Onesimus what the Lord had done with him. We all have these opportunities every day. When somebody at work slights us, or somebody at home crosses us. In His steps. That's our calling.

*3. Problems are opportunities for us to get involved in each other's lives.*

Like Paul did, with Onesimus, then with Philemon. Dear friends, this is what the Christian life, what the *church*, is all about, *opportunities*.

Do you know of any brothers or sisters in Christ that aren't getting along? "Blessed are the peacemakers," said Jesus (Matt 5:9). So let's do it, by God's grace. Let's be peacemakers. Let's see interpersonal problems as opportunities to get involved in each other's lives, for the glory of God.

*4. Problems are opportunities for God to put the gospel on display.*

Communion