A Sermon for DaySpring

By Eric Howell

“*Reconditioned by the Resurrection*”

Philemon

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The two New Testament readings, Philemon and Luke work together to offer the new reality of the Kingdom of God. Today’s gospel reading begins and ends with two of Jesus’ hardest sayings. It begins with “Whoever does not hate father and mother and family cannot be my disciple,” and ends with “None of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions.” It’s hard to find harder sayings that these two: hate your family, give up everything you own.

We hear about the cost of discipleship but are you ready to pay that high of a price? Are any of us? It’s not entirely clear that Jesus should be taken brutally literal here: that his disciples must literally show hatred for their families and relinquish every single thing they own. In the larger context of everything else he said and everything he and the first Christians did; these unattainable sayings seem to be intended to be hyperbole: making a point by using startling language.

So, if that’s so, what is the point? What does the gospel say about discipleship in relationship with other people and possessions? Clearly there’s a challenge here, and an invitation written in huge letters and ancient lives: the gospel will change you by transforming the way you see everything. The gospel invites us into a new way of seeing and relating to the world around us. When all are beloved children of God we learn to love beyond the limitations of our natural families. When we learn to receive the sacredness of life as a gift, we have new eyes toward everything beyond what we think we possess.

A particularly potent example of this is tucked away in a corner of the New Testament rarely explored: the little book, Philemon. Here we see the gospel in action, an illustration of transformation in a practical, real life situation for some 1st century Christians and the kind of thing the gospel can do in all of our lives if we’re open, genuinely open and seeking the glory of the Lord disclosed on a cross. Let’s explore Philemon today.

The backstory of this book is helpful. Paul is imprisoned somewhere for preaching the gospel, which always for Paul seems to get him in trouble. The gospel Paul preaches is subversive of the ways in individual lives and of the systems of 1st century empire. In Jesus, Paul saw someone who has the power and authority of God which is greater than Caesar himself, but who emptied himself and in weakness became a servant of all, disobedient to any earthly authority and system that treated God’s children as if they were less than made in God’s own image. This got him in trouble.

Here he is in prison again, possibly Rome, but more likely Ephesus. While in prison, he receives a visitor named Onesimus. Onesimus is an interesting situation. He is a slave of a master named Philemon. Why and how Onesimus left Philemon is entirely conjecture, but it looks a lot like Onesimus has run away from Philemon, possibly stealing something when he left. He comes to Paul seeking solace, counsel, or protection, which is an ironic thing to seek from someone who themselves is in prison, but not so surprising. If you’re a slave in 1st century Roman empire, what better friend, what other friend, do you have besides someone who preaches the liberating, compassionate heart of Jesus.

Paul receives him, and they become close. Paul calls him ‘my heart’, my brother, and refers to him as my child--a term he only otherwise uses for Timothy. Onesimus helps Paul in some ways that mean a lot to Paul. And Paul helps Onesimus come to know the Lord. Onesimus has not only met in Paul someone who would be to him like a father, but also in Paul has met Jesus, who to him is a savior.

Then the day comes when Paul sends Onesimus back to Philemon. He sends him back with a letter, written on a parchment, rolled into a scroll. “Go back to Philemon, and take this letter to the church.” That Onesimus went back when he could have fled away is a testament to courage and trust. The letter he brought with him, which would have been read before the gathered Christian community is what we know as Philemon in the New Testament. Imagine the scene: the small community is gathered together to hear a letter read out loud that has just arrived from Apostle Paul in the hands of Onesimus who has come back to Philemon. What drama!

Have you ever heard scripture read and felt in that moment like it was written just for you? Sometimes we crave a word from God that seems like it’s written just for me, even if it’s a challenging word. In the case of Philemon, it was actually written for him. Though read to the whole congregation, it was directed to him. The designated reader opens the scroll and begins to read out loud: “When I remember you in my prayers, I always thank God because I hear of your love for all the saints and your faith toward the Lord Jesus. . . .the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you, my brother.”

Everyone in the congregation nods. Philemon it seems was a person of importance in this church whom Paul knew well. Probably Paul was the one who introduced Philemon to the Lord. It may have been his house they were meeting in. He seems to be a generous person in the best sort of way, giving freely and generously to people in need, not just meeting their needs, but don’t you love this phrase, “refreshing their hearts” as he did. Philemon was a good man.

Everyone is nodding at this well-deserved praise for Philemon. Everyone perhaps but Onesimus, standing there awkwardly in the shadows not yet knowing how Philemon is going to treat him when he gets him alone. Slavery in the 1st century wasn’t the brutal, race-base system of the modern era, but still, runaway slaves generally were not treated kindly, whether they returned or not. Philemon was in his rights to have Onesimus beaten, or worse, as punishment.

Paul’s praise of Philemon in the letter turns quickly to a request: I want you to do something for me. I need your help. Since I’ve been in prison, I’ve come to have a child. I’m appealing to you on his behalf to help him, not out of duty to my command, but out of love for me and for the Lord, take care of my son.” Imagine the chatter mummering through the room. Paul has a son? “Yes, I am appealing to you for my child whose father I have become in my imprisonment. His name is . . .Onesimus!”

Did every head in the room turn to face Onesimus standing there? Did they suddenly see him with new eyes—a runaway slave beloved by apostle Paul? Or did every head turn to face Philemon, wondering what in the world he was going to do now? Or did everyone just keep looking straight ahead, dying to know what everyone else was thinking in that moment?

The reader continues reading the letter to Philemon in the hearing of everyone else, “Onesimus was useless to you, but now he is useful both to you and me. The word useful is what Onesimus means. It’s a play on words. I’m sending him, my own heart, back to you. I would have rather kept him here with me to serve me and the gospel, but you didn’t choose that and whatever happens now needs to be your choice. Your choice must be out of love not duty. In the name of Jesus who laid down his authority to become a servant, I’m asking, not commanding. What love means is to receive him as more than a slave, a brother in the flesh and in the Lord.

“If you consider me your partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. If he has wronged you in any way or owes you anything, you can charge it to my account. I’ll pay it all. I won’t even mention that you owe me your whole life.

“You have refreshed the saints. Now refresh my heart in Christ. I know you will do this. I know you will do even more than I say. I’ll see you soon. Prepare a room for me. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Signed, Paul.

The scroll was rolled up. The short letter is finished. The room is silent. Now what? Onesimus had run away, now was sent back and came back. But now what? Would Philemon forgive him or punish him? Would he receive him back as his slave and let bygones be bygones, restoring the old status quo of power and servitude. Or would he do as Paul is asking? But what is Paul asking: is he asking for forgiveness and restoration of what was, or is he advocating for freedom from slavery, is Onesimus to be forgiven as a slave or set free as a brother in Christ? It’s not entirely clear.

I wish I could say we knew what happened in those moments, but we don’t. I wish I could say Philemon walked over to Onesimus, looked him in the eye, shook his hand, and then embraced him like a brother, that the whole community surrounded them in a tear-filled embrace of joy at the grace of God made manifest in the freedom given to this man. I hope that’s what happened.

I wish I could say that this little letter from the 1st century as it became part of the New Testament inspired Christians through the centuries to dismantle systems of oppression in the spirit of liberating Philemon and that Christians battled the demons of slavery until they rooted it off the face of the earth, believing that no one should ever be in bondage to another and every person is a child of God. I wish I could say every slave owner who sat with his Bible and read Philemon through all the centuries would have seen himself addressed by the gospel to give up what he owned and restore the dignity of human creatureliness in the image of God to all of God’s children. As you know, that didn’t happen. It happened in some places, but in just as many, slave masters used Onesimus’ return to justify the slavery system.

We might wish we’d had a Second letter to Philemon, like 2 Corinthians or 2 Thessalonians, 2 Philemon: written and sent just days after the first one, just a short letter would do, something like, “Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus to Philemon my brother. Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. You know, I’ve been thinking. After further consideration, I was too subtle in the last letter. Release that man. You know that in Christ all are free. There is neither Jew nor Greek, male nor female, slave nor free. (Seems like I wrote that somewhere else.) A person cannot own another person; we all are servants of God. Slavery between people is anathema to the gospel and so are laws, traditions, and cultures that perpetuate the systems, the principalities and powers that keep other people oppressed. Put an end to all that among you and work to rid society of it. You’ll be glad you did. Free Onesimus. For in his freedom, you will find your own. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Signed, Paul. PS Save this letter too. They’ll put it in a book someday.”

Maybe we don’t need a second letter to Philemon. Maybe one will do. The one we have is a powerful enough test case of the theological convictions of the gospel, “We are ministers of reconciliation . . .If anyone is in Christ there is a new creation.”

I do think Paul is encouraging Philemon to free Onesimus, both from his wrongdoing and from his bondage. I think this book in the New Testament is an example of the gospel at work, working out in our messy lives and broken world the new creation that is born by the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

At the heart of the Philemon/ Onesimus relationship is what is at the heart of relationships everywhere: God’s grace working in us gives us eyes to see the other in a whole new light. Enemies, children, the elderly, widows, orphans, sojourners in the land, our families and possessions. We have here a paradigm of what happens when we see another human being with eyes reconditioned by the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

What relationship needs to be reconditioned in your life? This is the question Philemon poses to us? They all had to do something: Paul had to demonstrate great courage and leadership in this. He had to say hard words to Onesimus: you need to go back and face this and not run. Paul had to challenge his friend and the church: you need to free him. Are you a Paul who needs to take the initiative to restore broken relationships and challenge unjust systems? Are you a Paul?

Onesimus had to have courage to go back. This was a Jonah moment for him, but he went back to the hard thing to face what he had done and who he was, not knowing if he would be restored or something even more. Are you an Onesimus who needs to trust the gospel and place yourself into the mercy of God and God’s people? And probably needs to forgive someone who has hurt you over a long time. Are you an Onesimus?

Philemon had to find a new way of looking at the whole world: the gospel suddenly challenged him in ways he may have not figured. Being a Christian was going to overturn his whole life. The Gospel of Jesus wasn’t just about his feelings or his intellectual beliefs. The Gospel was going to rearrange all of his relationships. Are you a Philemon who needs to let the Gospel rearrange your life whatever the cost?

This little book, hiding in the dusty corner of the New Testament is potent. It can change your life if you receive it as a word for you from the Lord, and maybe it can change the world. We need such a word, that the gospel is indeed good news, just the sort of good news that can free a man, or two of them, or a whole community of people from the way their lives were structured at the expense of others, and ultimately be part of freeing the world from its slavery to slavery; freeing those with eyes to see to live with a whole new set of eyes, a new vision of new creation in the name and power of Jesus. May it be true for us today as well. May Jesus Christ be Lord of every relationship and every last penny and every way we live.

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