

Prisoners of Christ Jesus

Philemon 1:1-25

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January 4, 2015

If you would, please take a copy of God's holy Word in your hands. You'll find pew Bibles in the pockets in the pews in front of you if you don't have a Bible with you. Turn with me to Paul's letter to Philemon, just before Hebrews, right after Titus, on page 1000 in the church Bibles. Before we read it together, let's go to God in prayer. Let's pray together.

Our Father, would You help us as You speak to be receptive. Give us grace that like well-tilled soil our hearts may receive the seed of the Word of God and bear fruit to the glory and praise of Your name. Deal with us in grace. Show us ourselves, our sin, our bankruptcy, our need. Show us for the encouragement of our hearts Your work thus far within us; how grace has led us safe thus far. And show us the road yet stretching before us and give us persevering grace by Your Word and the knowledge that grace will lead us home. In Jesus' name we pray, amen.

The book of Philemon; reading from verse 1. This is the Word of Almighty God:

Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother,

To Philemon our beloved fellow worker and Apphia our sister
and Archippus our fellow soldier, and the church in your house:

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

I thank my God always when I remember you in my prayers, because I hear of your love and of the faith that you have toward the Lord Jesus and for all the saints, and I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective for the full knowledge of every good thing that is in us for the sake of Christ. For I have derived much joy and comfort from your love, my brother, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you.

Accordingly, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do what is required, yet for love's sake I prefer to appeal to you - I, Paul,

an old man and now a prisoner also for Christ Jesus - I appeal to you 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.) I am sending him back to you, sending my very heart. I would have been glad to keep him with me, in order that he might serve me on your behalf during my imprisonment for the gospel, but I preferred to do nothing without your consent in order that your goodness might not be by compulsion but of your own accord. 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 beloved brother -especially to me, but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord.

So if you consider me your partner, receive him as you would receive me. If he has wronged you at all, or owes you anything, charge that to my account. I, Paul, write this with my own hand: I will repay it - to say nothing of your owing me even your own self. Yes, brother, I want some benefit from you in the Lord. Refresh my heart in Christ.

Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say. At the same time, prepare a guest room for me, for I am hoping that through your prayers I will be graciously given to you.

Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends greetings to you, and so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke, my fellow workers.

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.

Amen, and we praise God for this reading of His holy and inerrant Word.

Philemon: A Message of Reconciliation

In the closing months of 2014 we've had stark reminder after stark reminder pumped into our living rooms through our television screens of the disruptive and destructive power of social alienation, haven't we? I'm thinking here about Ferguson, Missouri and New York City and the way those events demonstrate just how ethnically divided we remain as a nation. But it's not just societal and ethnic alienation that remains a problem for us. For some of us, as family descended on us over the holidays, instead of joy and love and celebration old wounds and deep tensions bubbled to the surface, didn't they? Harsh words were exchanged; manipulative behaviors, aggravated existing frustrations. Alienation penetrates into our homes and families and personal lives. It's not just out there on our TV screens; it's in here too, right? In our lives and in our homes and in our hearts - alienation. Over the next few Lord's Day Evenings we are going to look together at Paul's letter to Philemon because here we get to see how the Gospel radically reconstructs our relationships to one another within the

body of Christ, the Church, so that instead of alienation there can be intimacy and fellowship and love, which means of course, that Philemon is a book the message of which we urgently need to master in these days in which we live. It is a book the message of which we urgently need to be mastered by in the year ahead of us.

As you may know, the letter to Philemon is unique in the New Testament for at least two reasons. First, a quick glance will immediately reveal it is the shortest of Paul's letters - just 25 verses. And while for many its brevity has led to its general neglect, it may well be the least well-known I think of Paul's letters. A careful reading of Philemon will demonstrate that actually, although it is brief, it is still enormously instructive. Like a diamond, it might be small, but it is immensely precious. And it's unique secondly not just for its brevity but also because unlike the other letters of the New Testament Philemon does not really address the general needs of the churches. It is not primarily a doctrinal letter offering theological instruction. Rather, Philemon responds to a very specific interpersonal problem between two individuals in a local church. This is a letter about reconciliation.

Freedom, Slavery, and Gospel-Solvent

Philemon, who's mentioned in verse 1 along with his wife Apphia, is a local leader, maybe he's an elder, and a patron of the church in the city of Colossae. One of the congregations of the Colossian church, one of the member congregations we would say of the Colossian presbytery meets in Philemon's home. Then in verse 2, along with Philemon and his wife, we're introduced also to Archippus, who according to Philemon's companion letter, the letter to the Colossians, Colossians 4:17, is involved and engaged in public ministry in the church at Colossae. He's probably their pastor. And Paul is writing to them because a problem has arisen within Philemon's own household that if allowed to continue could have a disruptive effect on the harmony and the peace of the fellowship that gathers there. Philemon's slave, Onesimus, has run away and as verse 18 hints he likely has stolen from his master, presumably resources to fund his getaway. And Onesimus has fled and somehow found his way to Rome, the capital city of the empire, hoping perhaps to disappear in the crowds that gathered there from all across the empire. But while he was there something happened to Onesimus that Onesimus had not anticipated. He encounters the apostle Paul and he is converted wonderfully, gloriously. And so now Onesimus, in the wake of the saving change that has been wrought in his heart, devotes himself to caring for the aging apostle who is living as an imperial prisoner under house arrest in Rome. And for his part, Paul also cares deeply for Onesimus but he nevertheless thinks it right to send Onesimus back to his master, Philemon. But as he sends him, he sends along with him this letter in an attempt to secure a welcome for this runaway slave.

Now sometimes people object to the letter of Philemon because Paul nowhere in

it denounces the wicked institution of slavery or calls for Onesimus' immediate emancipation. The great Biblical scholar, J.B. Lightfoot who comments on this letter, notes those facts directly and acknowledges them, yet nevertheless I think he responds helpfully to that objection. "In the New Testament in general and in Philemon in particular," says Lightfoot, "a principle is boldly enunciated which must in the end prove fatal to slavery. Where the Gospel taught that whatever conventional distinctions human society might set up - slavery - the supreme King of heaven refuses to acknowledge any. That the slave, notwithstanding his slavery, was Christ's freedman and the free, notwithstanding his liberty, was Christ's slave. When the church carried out this principle by admitting the slave to her highest privileges, inviting him to kneel side by side with his master at the same holy table, when in short the apostolic precept that in Christ Jesus is neither bond nor free was not only recognized but acted upon, then slavery was doomed. Henceforward it was only a matter of time. Here was the idea which must act as a solvent, must disintegrate this venerable institution however deeply rooted and however widely spread." That is what Philemon gives us - Gospel solvent to melt and disintegrate and dissolve prejudice and alienation and to effect, reconciliation.

And so in the next few weeks, God willing, as we look at the letter together, we're going to trace out how the Gospel does that. But tonight, we turn our attention to the prayer with which the letter begins, because here we see Paul apply that Gospel solvent to the heart of Philemon himself.

Look at the text with me please. After the apostolic greeting in verses 1 to 3, Paul begins with a report of the content of his prayers for Philemon. And there are two themes that stand out that I want you to notice. First of all, there is in this prayer a celebration of spiritual reality; a celebration of spiritual reality. And then secondly, there is a call for spiritual maturity. A celebration of spiritual reality, verses 4, 5, and 7, and a call for spiritual maturity in verse 6.

I. A Celebration of Spiritual Reality

Let's think about Paul's celebration of spiritual reality first of all. Look at verses 4 and 5 please. "I thank my God always when I remember you in my prayers, because of your love and faith that you have toward the Lord Jesus and for all the saints." Now it's often suggested that if you want someone to do something you know is going to be difficult for them it's not a bad strategy to start off with a flattering word or two. And while that might appear on the surface to fit the structure of Paul's letter here, he leads after all with warm encouragement and commendation for Philemon before moving on to ask some hard things of him, I think actually much more is going on than sound psychological strategy. Paul really is pointing out to Philemon for his encouragement the work of God thus far in his life, not as emotional leverage somehow to coerce Philemon into action, but as a genuine motive to him to continue to press on in a pattern that

will bring glory and honor to God.

Power to Press On

There are times when, as we look at our lives and look at our own Christian progress, we are tempted to conclude that we have made little to no progress at all. Isn't that so? And if others around us in the church are silent, if we're left to muddle through all on our own as best we can, we may be inclined to think that our perceived or even real mediocrity is actually quite acceptable, that the Christian life is meant to be static and unchanging. Few things are as demotivating than the conviction that our efforts are unnecessary and ineffective. If we think the Christian life is meant to stay the same or if progress, even if it is possible is imperceptible - you'll never ever be able to identify it - then we will hardly devote ourselves to ruthlessly rooting out sin and striving hard after holiness. We will simply coast along at a low spiritual ebb thinking all is well. But if we can see that actually change is real, God is at work, we are not who we once were, progress has been made, well then though we may yet have mile upon mile still to go in our journey, we will not lose heart and we will not give up and we will not back down. Though we will stumble and fall along the way, we will get up and move forward because we know that our labor in the Lord is not in vain.

And that, I think, is what Paul is doing for Philemon here. He is pointing out spiritual reality in his life to help motivate him to press on. That is the real power of genuine spiritual encouragement, you know. It's not flattery; let's be clear. We can be terribly good at flattery, can't we? But flattery is not godly. Flattery is not godly. Flattery breaks the ninth commandment. It bears false witness. It exaggerates and it manipulates in the service of a private agenda. But true, godly encouragement has no other agenda than the welfare of our brother and sister. We want them not to grow weary in well-doing. We want them to bear fruit and not to give up. And encouragement like that really can lift us from sorrow and frustration and self-reproach to see God's faithfulness despite our sin and it helps us press on. That is what Paul is doing here with Philemon. Let's work at being a congregation, shall we, in 2015, committed to true spiritual encouragement as we see progress in one another's lives and to say to one another, "God is at work in your heart, my dear brother, my dear sister; press on. Press on."

The Objects of Faith and Love: The Lord and His People

But do notice the specific encouragement that Paul gives us here. He picks up on Philemon's love and his faith in particular. But I want you to notice the objects of Philemon's love and faith. They are turned, notice, toward the Lord Jesus and they are for all the saints, or more literally, toward the Lord Jesus and unto all the saints. Jesus is the object of Philemon's faith and the supreme target of his love. Love and faith are directed toward him. That's hardly a surprise; that is what we would expect to see as the object of love and faith in the heart of any Christian -

the Lord Jesus. We trust Him, we adore Him, we give ourselves to serving Him with glad hearts and in true love. But when love and faith toward Jesus Christ are real, Paul tells us, actually quite surprisingly here, don't you think, Paul tells us when love and faith in Jesus are real they also always overflow towards Christ's church, towards His people as well. Philemon's love and faith are toward the Lord Jesus and for all the saints. The two go together, do you see? To love Jesus, in Paul's mind, implies and requires that we love Jesus' church. The church, after all, is an article of faith. We confess in the creed that "We believe in one holy, catholic, and apostolic Church, the communion of saints."

For many people, however, the church is a big disappointment. Isn't that true? Maybe its members have let you down. Maybe you've gotten cynical about the church over the years and so you find yourself saying things like this; see if this sounds familiar, if this has ever bubbled to the surface in your heart - "Jesus I love. It's the church I can't handle. I believe in the Gospel. It's Christians I don't trust." And we ought to be sympathetic to the woundedness that those expressions demonstrate and reveal. The church, a little cynically perhaps, the church has been said, after all, to be the only hospital that shoots its own wounded. And some of you know what it's like to be hurt by the church and you're tempted to pull back and keep your distance. But I do want you to see from our text that actually commitment to the church, in all its ugliness and mess, is integral to following Jesus Christ in all His purity and grace. You can't have Him and not have His people. It is an oxymoron, a contradiction in terms, to speak of a churchless Christian. In fact, it probably reveals a deep spiritual dysfunction in your soul. All is not well with your heart. If you think it is possible to trust and serve Christ, to have love and faith toward the Lord Jesus while at the very same time distancing yourself from all the saints, as the apostle John puts it in 1 John 2:9, "Whoever says he is in the light but hates his brother is still in the darkness. Whoever loves his brother abides in the light." It is an evidence of spiritual reality that when you say you trust in Jesus you love His people, warts and all, failure and sin and dysfunction and all.

Refreshing the Heart of the Saints

And like all true Christian graces, worked in our hearts by the Holy Spirit, in Philemon's case this love and faith are not abstract doctrinal convictions, much less are they vague feelings of benevolence towards the church. No, it gets intensely practical for Philemon. Do you see that in verse 7? Look at verse 7. Paul tells Philemon just how delighted he is with the love that he can see on display in Philemon's heart. It has reached his ears because "the hearts of the saints have been refreshed by you." God has been using Philemon to refresh and encourage the people of God. He's been hard at work in the assembly, Philemon, making his love and his trust concrete in the way that he serves, quietly perhaps, behind the scenes even, but he serves the body of Christ. Here's what the centrality of the local church looks like in the life of a Christian - giving ourselves to serving one another, refreshing the hearts of the saints. It's

what Philemon did. His love and faith toward the Lord Jesus is accompanied by a love and faith that overflows, it bursts its banks and flows out toward all the saints to the deep refreshment of their hearts.

I wonder if that could be said about you as you look back on the year that is now behind us. "She refreshed the hearts of the saints at First Presbyterian Church." Or how about this for a resolution as we face 2015 - "Resolved, depending on the grace of the Holy Spirit, to refresh the hearts of the saints whenever I can." It is an evidence of the reality of our love and faith toward the Lord Jesus that it overflows toward all the saints. So that's the first thing to see here. Paul celebrates spiritual reality in Philemon's life. God has done it and it gives joy to the heart of the apostle and he wants to encourage his beloved brother, Philemon.

II. A Call for Spiritual Maturity

But then look at verse 6 with me please. Paul celebrates Philemon's spiritual reality first but now he calls for Philemon's spiritual maturity. There's still a road ahead of him to travel. Verse 6 - "I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective for the full knowledge of every good thing that is in us for the sake of Christ." And look carefully at that phrase, "the sharing of your faith," first of all. We tend to use that expression, "the sharing of our faith," to mean something like telling other people about Jesus - "I shared my faith with my colleague today." Meaning, "I talked about Christ with him or with her." But when Paul uses the word translated "sharing" it has much broader connotations than simply the verbal exchange of information. It is the important Greek word, we've met it often before as we've studied Paul's letters, it's the word "koinonia." It means, fellowship or communion or partnership, even sometimes giving from our financial resources or even sharing in a meal together. All of that is connoted by the word, "koinonia." So it's more than verbal sharing that Paul has in mind here. It is spiritual and it is practical; it's a catch-all word for any kind of giving and receiving of blessings and benefits enjoyed as a result of faith in Christ.

And Paul is praying that Philemon will be active in putting faith's fruit in his own life to good use for the blessing of others. That's what he means by "the sharing of his faith." He wants Philemon sharing, partnering, giving from his abundance for the glory of God, for the good of the church, and for the salvation of the lost. He's praying for a life in Philemon, for a life of active ministry. He doesn't want Philemon thinking for a minute that he can live like a passenger in the church of Jesus Christ. There ought to be *koinonia*, fellowship, sharing, partnership, give and take in his life and in ours.

Koinonia: The Key to Gospel Fellowship and Christian Growth

Now look again at verse 6. Paul tells us why he wants this life of *koinonia*, of

sharing and partnership and ministry for Philemon. "I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective" - for what? What will a life of service like this produce? Notice this. I think this is potentially revolutionary, actually. "I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective for the full knowledge of every good thing that is in us for the sake of Christ." Did you catch that? Look at it again. Here is the secret key to knowing spiritual blessing, a key that I think it missed by so very many of us. Some of us naturally incline to intellectual investigation. Others of us look for mystical experience. But for Paul, the path to knowing, really knowing the good things that are ours in Christ, the way to grasp the truth and taste the truth with our head and our heart together, has to do with service and sharing and partnership and mutual ministry and one-anothering within the fellowship of the body of Christ. That's what he says, isn't it? "I pray that the sharing of your faith, that *koinonia*, may become effective for the full knowledge of every good thing. We mustn't neglect study, neither must we fail to seek diligently legitimate spiritual experience. But Paul is teaching us that full knowledge happens when we are together in the fellowship of the whole people of God, sharing what we learn from our study, giving out of the riches of our experience, serving one another from our own abundance for the enrichment of the whole. Which means that maybe the missing ingredient in your spiritual experience is not some dramatic, supernatural power encounter that others around you have claimed and you have yet to experience, maybe it's not some new theological insight that you have hitherto somehow missed; maybe the real missing ingredient in your spiritual experience is service, knowing more and more with head and heart, tasting and seeing the goodness of the Lord is inextricably bound to *koinonia*, to partnership in ministry in God's economy and plan.

A Call to Spiritual Growth: In Knowledge, Experience, Understanding, and Maturity

So let's ask ourselves as we think about a year now stretching out before us - In what ways will I serve at First Presbyterian Church in 2015 among the people of God where God has placed me? It doesn't need to be formal and it doesn't need to be visible; there doesn't need to be a vote or a stamp of approval from anyone before you can get busy serving. It does not need a high profile to be real. Share and give and go and teach and pray and encourage and reach out to the lost and listen to the hurting and comfort those who mourn, weep with those who weep and rejoice with those who rejoice. Relieve the burdens; refresh the hearts of the saints. What is it going to be in 2015? Know that as you give yourself to *koinonia*, to service and sharing and partnership together in Gospel work, it's Paul's expectation and it ought to be ours that we will grow in spiritual knowledge, in spiritual experience and spiritual understanding, in spiritual maturity.

Now in the rest of Paul's letter, as we'll see God willing in the weeks ahead, he's going to push Philemon hard and he's going to push us hard towards the practice of Gospel reconciliation. But if that is ever going to be possible, we need to have the right perspective already in place in our thinking and in our living. We need a

ministry mindset and a service mindset that recognizes that maturity and growth and deep lasting spiritual experience all come together as we serve and partner together for the work of the kingdom. When we begin to see the Christian life as something that we live together in koinonia, sharing and fellowship and service, well then keeping other people at arm's length or treating them as inferior in any way to ourselves simply becomes impossible. With a ministry mindset, a koinonia mindset, a heart that is willing to serve and refresh the saints, it renders pride and self-aggrandizement utterly, utterly alien. May God be pleased to make us a serving church marked by love and faith toward the Lord Jesus and for all the saints in the year ahead of us so that each one of us might be marked by growing spiritual knowledge and understanding, a church of Gospel reconciliation and never alienation, to the glory and praise of God.

Let us pray together.

Our Father, we thank You that the Gospel is a solvent that dissolves prejudice and alienation, that breaks down the walls we build to keep others unlike ourselves out. Would You continue to melt and dissolve our hearts and cause a spiritual fall that we may have love and faith toward the Lord Jesus and for all the saints, giving ourselves to refreshing the hearts of the people of God, serving and sharing and practicing koinonia, partnership together in kingdom work, that we may grow in full knowledge of every good thing that is ours in Christ, to the praise of Your great name. Amen.

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