

Gospel Partners

Philemon 1:1-25

By [David Strain](#)

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Now if you would turn in your own copies of God's Word or use one of the church Bibles and open them to Paul's letter to Philemon. First and 2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon, Hebrews - page 1000 in the church Bibles. Then once you have your Bibles turned to the correct page, let's bow our heads as we pray together. Let us pray.

O Lord, would You minister Your own Word to us that at the end of our service as we depart to our homes we would go in the awareness that God in Jesus by the Holy Spirit has instructed us and taught us and shaped us by His Word that the preacher would fade and Christ would step forth as the Prophet who speaks His Word to His church. Give to us then, we pray, ears to hear what the Spirit says to the church in this portion of Holy Scripture for Jesus' sake. Amen.

Paul's letter to 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 of 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 your very 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. Thanks be to God that He has spoken in His holy and inerrant Word.

The Dissolving of Prejudice

Tonight we've come to the final section in our studies of Paul's letter to Philemon. We're dealing tonight with verses 17 to 25. It is, as you will know if you've been with us over the last few weeks, it is a letter about reconciliation. In this case, reconciliation between Philemon, a householder in the city of Colossae, and Onesimus, his runaway slave who has recently been converted through the ministry of the apostle Paul whom Paul is now sending back to his master, no longer simply a slave but much more, as a beloved brother. As J. B. Lightfoot observed as he reflected on the epistle to Philemon, "The Gospel," he said, "is a solvent that disintegrates and dissolves prejudice and alienation." And that is what Paul seeks to apply in the concrete situation between Philemon and Onesimus and the church meeting in Philemon's house.

And I think we need to face that carefully here before we get into the details of this part of the letter. Christians can talk in abstract terms about reconciliation and overcoming our divisions and forgiveness and being restored in our relationships with people who have wronged us or against whom we have

sinned, but let's be honest - talk is cheap. And if you've never actually seen it happen you might be tempted to conclude that the Gospel, whatever people say about it, really has no power to effect the kind of restoration and reconciliation Christians claim for it all the time. And if that's true then it's only a short step from there to concluding that the Gospel itself is simply false. How careful we need to be, brothers and sisters, to see what is really at stake in our relationships with one another in the body of Christ. We cannot make soaring claims about the Gospel and its transforming power and still live with spite and anger and bitterness and resentment towards one another. It simply will not work. We undermine everything we claim to believe about the power of the good news to change lives and knit hearts one to another if as we claim ourselves to have been forgiven we will not forgive others in turn. And that's why the letter to Philemon is so very important for us because it takes us to a real life case study and it shows us that Gospel solvent at work so that we can see its power is for real.

So let's turn our attention there for a few moments please - Philemon, verses 17 through 25. I want you to see four things in this concluding portion of Paul's letter about Christian relationships. First, Christian relationships are patterned after the Gospel. Christian relationships are patterned after the Gospel. And secondly, Christian relationships are forged in union with Jesus Christ. Then thirdly, Christian relationships are sustained by prayer. And finally, Christian relationships are secure by grace. Okay, so that's where we're going. Christians relationships are patterned after the Gospel, forged in union with Christ, sustained by prayer, and secure by grace.

Christian Relationships Are Patterned After the Gospel

Let's think about the first of those - Christian relationships are patterned after the Gospel. Look at verses 17 through 19 please. Notice there that Paul addresses Philemon as his partner. "If you considered me your partner" - he wants Philemon to take Onesimus back and he reminds Philemon of the depths of the bond that they share together. They are partners. The word is *Koinonon*, related to the same word translated in verse 6 as "sharing" where Paul is talking about koinonia, partnership, service, mutual ministry one to another, give and take, fellowship, communion in Christ. So when Paul reminds Philemon of their partnership he's talking about a profound bond, spiritual and intimate, linking them in union and communion, participation and fellowship, service and sharing in the Lord Jesus Christ.

The Gospel Shape of Our Relationships

And then he highlights for Philemon the implications of that profound bond of Christian communion and fellowship. He asks Philemon to receive Onesimus as though he were receiving Paul himself, verse 17. And then Paul asks Philemon

to charge him as if he were Onesimus. You see that in verses 18 and 19. "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." Now that is not merely a gesture. That last phrase about Paul writing it with his own hand, that's not simply a gesture. This is formal, legal action as it were. Paul is writing a binding IOU. He means what he says. He is formally assuming the debt. Although, do notice that he's not shy in reminding Philemon of his own infinitely greater indebtedness to Paul in verse 19. "To say nothing," he adds rather slyly, "To say nothing of your owing me your very own self." Paul has led Onesimus to Christ but now it seems he has also led Philemon to Christ. Humanly speaking, Philemon owes everything to Paul.

But I wonder, did you see the pattern of Paul's argument there? Listen to it again. He says, "Treat Onesimus as though he were me, Philemon." That's verse 17. And then, "Charge me, Philemon, with all of Onesimus' debt. I will undertake his penalty" - verses 18 and 19. "I'll pay. You welcome him home and I'll stand in his room and stand if you will allow him to stand in mine. Give him my welcome; give me his debt." Do you see? What is that? Isn't that the pattern of the Christian Gospel itself? It is the mirror image, isn't it, of the self-giving of the Lord Jesus Christ who, "though he was rich became poor that we might become rich...who knew no sin yet became sin for us that we might become the righteousness of God in him...we all like sheep have gone astray, turned everyone to his own way, and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all"? That is what Jesus does for us reflected here in the way Paul acts for Onesimus. Jesus comes to His Father and says, as it were, "Father, put all the penalty on Me, but welcome him home with the gladness My own righteousness deserves. Father, let Me bear the cost, but let her enjoy the reward." As Martin Luther put it, "We are all God's Onesimi. Jesus paid and we all received." And in view of the great exchange that has taken place by God's grace, the debt of our sin is laid on Jesus and His righteousness is reckoned to our account. In light of that great exchange that has taken place, for each of us that are Christians, Paul is showing us here that all our relationships with one another must also begin to change too. Our attitude towards others must reflect and echo the pattern of Christ's attitude toward us. We forgive because we have been forgiven. Our relationships become Gospel-shaped, do you see?

A Picture of Communion

I remember while in ministry in London the great joy of our communion services there. It was our tradition in the denomination I belonged to then, after the sermon, for the congregation to rise from their seats during the singing of a psalm and to file forward to sit down again around an actual table spread with the elements, the bread and the wine of the Lord's Supper. And although our congregation was small, because it was located in downtown London, there were members in the church from all over the world. We had a Brazilian elder, a

Peruvian deacon sitting beside a Scottish lady and a couple from Holland. We had one member from the island of Trinidad and an Englishman from London, Russians, Americans, Asians - every language and background almost it seemed, gathered there around the Lord's Table. It was a beautiful picture. And at that time in London, God was bringing a large number of young Afrikaans-speaking, white South Africans to the city and many of them found their way to London City Presbyterian Church where I served. These are the first generation of young South Africans after the fall of apartheid and many of them, because they were Boers, they were Afrikaans speakers, were in the midst of a real identity crisis. How do I be a white South African in post-apartheid South Africa? Really struggling.

And as we sat together at the Lord's Table, we used a common cup for the wine, and so you can picture the scene when for the first time in their lives a Trinidadian woman passes a cup to a young white South African and that young white South African drinks from the same vessel as someone whose skin is not the same color as theirs. And you could actually see the kingdom of God expanding before their eyes. It was an extraordinary thing. As God's people felt in concrete terms what it means to belong together in the church of Jesus Christ, to be knit together in love, old alienation beginning to dissolve under the solvent of the Gospel, as people who would not naturally ever really have inclined to gather together are made partners, brought into koinonia, fellowship and union and communion with one another, all to the glory of God. That is what the Gospel does and it shows. It has a way of forcing the contours of our lives into its mold so that our relationships are Gospel-shaped. Christian relationships are patterned after the Gospel.

Christian Relationships Are Forged in Union With Christ

Then secondly, notice that Christian relationships are forged in union with Christ. Verse 20, "Yes, brother, I want some benefit from you in the Lord. Refresh my heart in Christ." Paul wants Philemon to benefit him and refresh his heart. That word, "benefit," is "*onimen*" - it comes from the same root as Onesimus' name, "useful." And the particular benefit Paul wants is therefore clear. It's a play on Onesimus' name. It's clear what benefit he wants; he wants Philemon to take Onesimus back. That's what will really refresh his heart. That's what Philemon is known for, after all, verse 7 - "refreshing the heart of all the saints." And now if Philemon takes Onesimus back he will refresh Paul's heart also.

But how is it that Paul can be so bold to press Philemon for these things? Well did you catch the phrases, "in the Lord," and "in Christ," there in verse 20? Those are not incidental expressions; they articulate a core idea in Paul's theology and it's all over this letter actually. Verse 1, Paul is a prisoner not "for Christ" but literally he is a prisoner "of Christ Jesus." Jesus is the reason he is where he is. Verse 8, he is bold to "command Philemon in Christ." Verse 16, Onesimus is now

more than a slave; now he's become a beloved brother "in the Lord." Epaphras, verse 23, is a fellow prisoner "in Christ Jesus." In Paul's thinking, the whole Christian life is lived out within union and communion and fellowship with Jesus. You are a Christian today because you are one with Christ. And because we're one with Christ, that makes us family. That's why Onesimus is now a "beloved brother in Christ," verse 16, and Philemon is Paul's "brother" in verse 20. The church of Jesus Christ, you know, is not a loose coalition. It's not a club or a social gathering; it's not a philanthropic society. It is not a loose assembly of disconnected individuals who happen to share a common religious interest. You're not here as consumers of goods and services. The church is not the spiritual equivalent of Wal-Mart where you show up to get what you need and then leave.

Overcoming Our Natural Barriers

You may have even heard recently of atheist mega-churches. That hit the news not so long ago. Atheist mega-churches cropping up around the world. They feature, apparently, rousing music and song, readings, quiet reflection, even a sermon. And there are in these mega-churches packed, attentive congregations. But these so-called churches promote atheistic, scientific materialism. There's no mention of God or Christ or Scripture. It is, I suppose, a recognition on their part that the church offers something valuable they don't want to miss, even though they've repudiated all spirituality. It's an attempt to recreate community, provide a gathering place with common values that create shared identity even though it is stripped of religion. But one thing that the atheist mega-churches completely miss, what they don't understand and what they can't fathom is the one thing that makes the church the church - union with Christ! When people are united to Christ, when they gather together in union with Christ, they do so family, they do so bound to one another. They don't need to create bonds through worship and ritual; those bonds are there, created for them in Jesus. They are one in Him and they can't live apart!

Brothers and sisters, how do you think about the church? Do you think about it as a provider of religious goods and services? A source of community? A gathering point for friends? The church is not any of those things primarily; it is first a family gathering where we are drawn together by our union with one another in Jesus. We belong together. And that's what Paul is pressing on Philemon, you know. "You belong together," he's saying to him, regarding Onesimus. "You belong together. You are in Christ together. You are family now. I know he wounded you, I know your social standing and past history gives every earthly reason for hostility towards him, Philemon, but you are in Christ now and everything is different. You belong together!" And that is the implication of the Gospel for all of us. It means that this place is your place and these people are your people. They are different from you, maybe. Maybe you have plenty of reasons for distrust in your background. Maybe you have little in common by this world's standards. You may have economic barriers to overcome and ethnic barriers and barriers of

class or of culture. But if tonight you are a Christian, you have every reason not to pull back and withdraw, every reason to work to overcome those remaining barriers, whatever they may be, because you are already one. You have the most intimate, the most profound connection that is possible for human beings to share already binding you together. You are in Christ together! And so if you are a Christian you have come home when you come to the church of Jesus Christ. You've come home. That's the force of Paul's argument to Philemon. "He's your brother because together you are in Christ, so receive him." And that is the pressing force of the argument for all of us - receive and love and work to overcome whatever the barriers may be because you are one in your common Savior.

Christian Relationships Are Sustained By Prayer

Christian relationships are patterned after the Gospel, they are forged in union with Christ, then thirdly, do notice from our passage that Christian relationships are sustained by prayer. They are sustained by prayer. Verses 21 and 22 - Paul is confident, he says, that Philemon will comply with his wishes for Onesimus, even beyond his expectations, and he knows he needn't check up on Philemon and yet he says he hopes to visit him soon, "So get the guest room ready, Philemon." But understand as Paul is writing these words he is in jail in Rome. "I hope to visit you soon," he says. "Get the guest room ready." He's in shackles. So on what does his hope rest? What does the text say? "I hope that through your prayers I will be graciously given to you." Here is as strong a statement of the instrumentality of Christian prayer in the outworking of the purposes of God as you will find anywhere in the Bible. Paul believes, doesn't he, we've seen this already, in the sovereign providence of God, working all things together for the good of those who love Him and are called according to His purpose. That's what he was saying to Philemon back in verse 15. "This perhaps is the design of God in Onesimus' escape from your household, that you might receive him back now not simply as a slave but as much more - a beloved brother. God's sovereign purpose is designed much more by Onesimus' departure than you could have conceived, Philemon."

God's Sovereignty & the Prayers of His People

He believes in the sovereignty of God and yet there is no hint here, none at all, of tension or contradiction between the sovereign purposes of God and the instrumentality of the prayers of his people. "I hope," he says, "through your prayers to be given to you graciously, one day soon." God reigns over everything and yet He has ordained much of what comes to pass to happen as His people pray. And so Paul knows that prayer is a mighty thing. And the knowledge that Philemon and perhaps also the church that meets in his household is praying for him, that fills him with hope. We say it often, very easily don't we - "I'm praying for you." Most of the time, I hope, we're sincere and we do actually pray, but how

easy to take that for granted, the prayers of your brothers and sisters. But the prayers of the people of God - do you see from our text - the prayers of the people of God have power because God has ordained to fulfill His design for our good in answer to them! So pray on and pray boldly and pray urgently and insistently and persistently and take heart and find hope in the knowledge that your brothers and sisters are praying for you! Much of the sustaining grace of God comes to us in response to the cries of the people of God, one for another. Christian relationships are patterned after the Gospel, forged in union with Christ, sustained by prayer. We need each other's prayers. God has ordained to answer prayer and in response to them bring blessing and sustaining grace into our lives.

Christian Relationships Are Sustained By Grace

And then finally, Christian relationships are secure by grace. They are secure by grace. Verses 23 to 25 - "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." Paul's talking about his ministry team who are still with him even though he is in prison. Did you see Demas on the list? He is here a fellow worker engaged in Christian ministry alongside the apostle Paul. What greater mentor in ministry could be imagined for a man training and serving in the kingdom than the mighty apostle Paul? One would have us, I'm sure here Paul no doubt had, bright hopes for Demas. Later in 2 Timothy chapter 4 and verse 10, however, Paul will say of Demas that in love with the present world, Demas will desert him; Demas has deserted him. Demas, it turns out, is a false believer. It is, I think, a chilling warning. Paul talks about him here as a fellow laborer, a co-worker for the Gospel. Even ministry leaders can be frauds it seems. We ought to take warning from Demas not to presume upon God nor to think ourselves secure because of our profile or reputation or ministries because of some service or some privileged position we hold within the church of Jesus Christ. Hear the warning of Demas' story.

God's Grace Keeps Us

So what is it that makes the difference? Why is it that some are kept and some persevere and those like Demas fall in love with the world and walk away from the Gospel? Why do some press on and others do not? On what shall your security rest? Well Paul tells us, doesn't he? That's why he ends the way he does. Verse 25, "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit." Grace shall keep you. If you look to your own labors, your own accomplishments, your own profile and standing, your own ministries, your own opportunities to make a difference for Christ to be the ground of your own security you run a grave risk. You are in danger of following Demas. None of those things can keep you safe and secure. Only the grace of the Lord Jesus with your spirit can sustain you and keep you. "O to grace how great a debtor, daily I'm constrained to be! Let Thy goodness, like a fetter, bind my wandering heart to Thee. Prone to wander, Lord,

I feel it; prone to leave the God I love. Here's my heart, O take and seal it, seal it for Thy courts above." Grace, the grace that we have in Jesus is what we need.

And so Paul's final word is a helpful word to us, isn't it? Flee back to Christ. Lean on Christ. You find sustaining grace only here in Christ. Christian relationships are Gospel-shaped, patterned after the Gospel. Those who are forgiven learn to forgive and they are forged, established and created in union with Christ so that if you are in Jesus, you are home with family when you are with the church. And they are sustained by prayer - God listens when His children cry out to Him on behalf of one another and He answers. And Christian relationships are secure, by grace. And so let us look together to Christ and learn as we rest upon Him to reconfigure our own lives to echo and mirror the pattern of the Gospel that the Lord may make us a blessing, one to another, to the glory and praise of His great name. Shall we pray together?

Our Father, thank You that Jesus is a perfect Savior. There is grace to sustain us that flows from Him to us. Thank You for the prayers of the people of God. Many of us in this room are the recipients of grace from Jesus flowing from Him to us in answer to the cries of the saints in this place. And so as we give You praise for that grace we pray that it will do a further work in our hearts that we might learn still more of what it means to let go of bitterness and anger and to tear down every barrier between ourselves and one another that our relationships together, forged in union with Christ, might mirror and become patterned after the Gospel by which Christ Himself has loved us. For we ask this in Jesus' name, amen.

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