

Sermon Notes, Sunday 4th January 2026, Philemon 1:1-25, “Cry Freedom”

Across the broader Christian church in this country, you hear an argument: Is Christianity about mending our relationship with God, or with one another. Some say: The world is broken, people are hurting and Jesus was all about love. Jesus did not start a religion that's just about God. Others reply: Join Rotary or the Lions for social impact, or a sports club for camaraderie, but don't turn Christianity into a social club.

Which side are you? As so often when presented with a dilemma, the answer is to refuse the dilemma. It's a false choice. The vertical gives you the horizontal. Trying to fix our human relationships on our own always fails. And a real relationship with Jesus cannot leave our human relationships unchanged.

This short letter to Philemon is the most personal letter in the New Testament. But it's in our New Testament. It shows how faith in Jesus explodes our human relationships. It doesn't just make a few small changes to them. There are all kinds of unwritten rules that govern our relationships. Jesus subverts the lot.

Let's look at this, and see how.

Backstory

Compare the names in this letter with the greetings at the end of Colossians, you realise that Philemon was in Colossae. He was a wealthy man, and had a large house. One of the churches in Colossae met there. Quite possibly Apphia is his wife, and Archippus is his son.

Paul is writing from prison, possibly in Rome. Somehow, in his prison cell, he met a young man called Onesimus. Verse 16: Onesimus had been a slave of Philemon, and had probably run away. Being a slave was bad, being a runaway slave was really bad. There was a bounty for you. Anyone at any time could return you back to your owner for a reward. Your owner would not be glad to see you back. You could even be killed as an example. You run away trying to get freedom. The reality was the rest of your life looking over your shoulder.

But Onesimus met Paul, Paul told him about Jesus, and Onesimus has become a Christian. Paul is sending Onesimus back to Philemon, and this letter is going with him. That journey would have been so painful. He must have dreaded arriving home.

Is Slavery OK?

What Paul asks Philemon to do is radical. But not radical enough for some people. Some Christians worry that Paul doesn't say that slavery is wrong.

Some people go even further. If Paul stays silent in the face of the great evil that was slavery, he is effectively condoning and approving of slavery.

The next step is to say that Paul approved of slavery, but we know better. At the end of the 18th century, Christians fought hard to end the slave trade. Finally in

1807, William Wilberforce (MP for Hull) got the “Slave Trade Act” through parliament.

So, people say, Christians read the New Testament, and followed the gaze of Jesus forwards. The New Testament changed things so far, but it’s our launchpad to continue improving our sense of right and wrong. Slavery shows us that the Bible is old and limited; it only goes so far, and we need to move things on.

3 quick comments in case you meet this argument.

1. Paul doesn’t explicitly say here that slavery itself is wrong. That’s very different from saying he taught it’s fine.

2. Slavery in the Roman empire was very different from slavery in Georgian England. English slavery usually started with kidnap, stealing people, something the Bible does forbid in Deuteronomy 24. Slaves were mistreated horrendously. Slaves had no rights in the Roman empire, but were valuable property so mostly treated well. Many were paid. What Wilberforce got rid of was very different from what Philemon used.

3. Christians did not abolish slavery in spite of the Bible’s silence. It was Scripture that led them to fight that battle. The teaching in Philemon sowed the seeds for the end of slavery. Paul tells slaves in 1 Corinthians 7 to take any opportunity to become free. The church is God’s restored society, and it’s clear there should be no slavery there.

Philemon’s Response

So, what does Paul ask Philemon to do? Four things

(i) Receive him

Verse 17. Give him the kind of welcome he’d give if it was Paul at the door.

(ii) Remit his wrongs

That’s to say, forgive him. Verses 18-19a.

We don’t know the detail, but it seems Onesimus did some bad things as he left and quite probably stole from his master. Paul asks Philemon to write it all off.

(iii) Release him

Slightly ambiguous. You could read Philemon as Paul assuming he’ll keep Onesimus as his slave, but radically change the way he thinks of him and treats him. But I think this is a call to go the whole way and release him. That makes most sense of these verses.

Verses 15-16. “No longer as a slave”.

(iv) Return him

Verses 13-14. Paul wants Onesimus with him, being useful for him. But Onesimus belongs to Philemon. So Paul sends him back, in the hope Philemon will send him back to Paul voluntarily.

Response?

Receive him. Forgive him. Release him. Return him.

Hugely radical. The cliff-hanger is: What happened?

We're not told. Except the Colossian church surely wouldn't have kept this letter if it hadn't been a good-news story. Tradition has it that Onesimus became Bishop of Ephesus before being martyred under Domitian.

As I say, this letter was kept so the church down the ages can hear the radical way Jesus reworks our relationships. Here are three beautiful things the gospel does for people who follow Jesus

1. The Gospel Clears our Debt

The call to forgive anything he's done, and pay back anything he owes, is a huge thing to ask. How can Philemon cancel all his wrongs? How can Paul offer to pay back all his debts?

Because of Jesus. Verse 19: "not to mention that you owe me your very self".

So, Philemon also became a Christian as a result of Paul's ministry. Paul makes the point that Philemon owes Paul everything. Paul could pay Philemon back for everything Onesimus has done wrong, broken, or stolen. Philemon would still be the one owing.

That's because when we become a Christian, Jesus cancels all our spiritual debts. We owe God total loyalty, total devotion, total obedience. We fail every day. The next day, we owe God everything again, so even if I am perfect I have nothing extra to pay back yesterday. But when Jesus died on the cross, he took those debts on himself, and he cancelled them.

Remember Paul wrote Colossians at the same time. Maybe it was Onesimus that prompted him to write 2:13b-14.

Jesus told a story (Matthew 18:21-35) about a man who owed someone the equivalent of the GDP of a small country. Unsurprisingly, he couldn't pay it back, so was about to be thrown into prison. He pleaded for mercy, and had that whole debt cancelled. Generosity off the face of the planet – this would never happen. The man went and found one of his fellow servants, probably a slave. That slave owed him about £200. He too pleaded for mercy. The first man throttled the servant, and threw him into the debtors prison.

Jesus had let Philemon off a debt so big he could never have paid it off. Jesus did that only because Paul had told him all about this Jesus. Paul is not asking for payment, but Philemon owes him big time. The least Philemon can do is remit the debts of Onesimus.

It's the same for us. Forgiveness is really hard to do. People carry long memories. Grudges escalate. Resentments settle. People avoid one another long after they've forgotten why.

Faith in Jesus explodes our relationships. If you're a Christian, Jesus has forgiven you a debt the size of the galaxy. As we think on that, we find the power to cancel the things others have done to us. We don't become naive. Trust and responsibility are not just given back. We don't put ourselves in harm's way. But

we let it go. We let what was done to us have no hold over us, and transform the way we treat people.

2. The Gospel Makes us Family

In verse 9, Paul calls Onesimus his son; he led him to follow Jesus. Paul also led Philemon to follow Jesus. So Philemon is Paul's son too. That means they're brothers. More than that, they both have God as their heavenly Father. In Christ, Onesimus and Philemon are brothers.

Verses 15-16 are beautiful verses. When Onesimus ran away, it was painful for Philemon. He'd lost his slave, although verse 11 says he wasn't a particularly good one!

Then Paul says "what if". So often with God, something painful happens, and we later find he had a purpose. As you go on as a Christian, you learn to say "what if this was what God was doing". Here: What if your temporary loss was so you might have him forever as a brother. Literally, "for eternity". Once upon a time, Philemon was master, Onesimus was slave. Then Philemon lost his slave. But now he has him back. For all eternity, they are brothers.

So Paul addresses Philemon as a brother. Paul is an apostle. He could pull rank, and insist Philemon does the right thing. Instead you get this: verses 8-9; verse 14. Paul appeals on the basis of love. He doesn't use his rights. And he asks Philemon not to use his rights. For the purpose of this letter, Paul the apostle is an old man in prison who loves Philemon very much.

It is impossible to exaggerate how radical this was in the ancient world. Slaves and free people were not the same rank, did not mix. It was *the* big division.

Imagine church on Sunday after Onesimus gets back. They're sat side by side, singing the same songs. They receive the same bread and wine at the Lord's Supper, they eat and drink together. Philemon and Onesimus are both on the Rockets team. One week, Onesimus is leading Rockets and Philemon is helping. Next week, they're on again, but it's Philemon's turn to lead. In the Roman Empire, this was unthinkable.

There are so many points of contact with today's world.

MPs from opposite benches worshipping and serving together at the same churches.

Far left, far right? They don't usually mix. Helped by social media that only suggests friends who would be similar. People enjoy their bubbles of like-mindedness. In church, we're family. Serving on the same teams. Sharing the same cup.

Newcastle supporter, or Sunderland? Apparently, if you live in South Shields, there are red pubs and black and white pubs. In churches, we mix.

Hospitals are very hierarchical. Here, the student nurse prays with the clinical lead. At our Christmas Party, they supervise the bouncy castles together.

The gospel makes us family. This was completely radical, and slavery was where you saw this most vividly. It is just as radical today. Faith in Jesus explodes our relationships.

3. The Gospel Makes us Partners

When we read Paul writing from prison, we mustn't get the impression that he's cold and lonely and just misses his mates. When Paul wants Onesimus to stay, it's not self-indulgence and self-pity. There's something going on here.

Four times in this short letter, Paul calls someone his "fellow"-something. Verse 1, "fellow worker". Verse 2, "fellow soldier". Verse 23, "fellow prisoner". Verse 24, "fellow workers". These aren't just Paul's mates. These are people he works with, battles with, suffers with.

That's why Paul wants Onesimus back. Verse 11: He is *useful* to him.

Verse 13: Ideally Paul would have Philemon with him, helping him in his gospel ministry while Paul is in chains. But Onesimus could do this too.

Notice the language in verse 17: He doesn't say, "if you consider me a friend". "If our friendship means anything to you". It's "if you consider me a partner".

Paul is on the move. He's not expecting to stay in prison. Verse 22. Paul still has work to do. Philemon and Onesimus *both* have a part to play. Philemon's role will be to put Paul up in the spare room, hopefully. For today, his role is to receive, release and return Onesimus.

One short phrase we use to describe our church is that we are: "A family on mission together". Both halves of that drive Paul's appeal to Philemon. He is to treat Onesimus as family, but he's also to treat him as a fellow missionary on the same team.

Here's the other way faith in Jesus explodes our relationships. Jesus takes people that the world says don't belong together. Immigrants and native-born. Left and right. Old and young. Healthy and sick. Confident and broken.

Jesus puts us in a family so we can advance his great mission of telling people how they can follow him and be rescued too.

Conclusion

So, is Christianity about the vertical relationship, getting things right with God, or the horizontal relationships, mending brokenness and fragmentation between people? Yes!

Jesus is all about saving people, writing off their spiritual debts, and making them his family and his servants. But as he does that, he takes the categories society divides us into, and he blows all of that apart.

It's a beautiful picture. If you're not yet a Christian, there is nothing like this anywhere else in the world.

For those of us who follow Jesus, aren't you glad this little letter made it into the New Testament? The gospel of Jesus Christ radically transforms our relationships

with one another. What a wonderful way to be launched into a new year, with a clear vision for the kind of church Jesus wants us to be.