



FORGOTTEN LETTERS OF THE NEW TESTAMENT (Philemon)

Discussion Questions

Connecting from last week: What is one thing that you can do in the coming week to build yourself up in the Good News of Jesus? (Try to think of something that grows your **knowledge** about God and your **relationship** with God.)

1. What most stands out for you in this passage?
2. Has a close friend ever made an audacious request of you? Why did love enable them to ask this? (even if you didn't say yes!)

Read Philemon 1-7

3. To whom is the letter being written? Who would have heard it read?
4. Can you outline who were the other people named (both at the beginning and at the end)?
5. Even though this letter is a private appeal, what would have been the effect of reading it publicly? How do you think this would have made Philemon feel?
6. What difference would it have made if Onesimus was the one delivering it?
7. In what way do our personal choices of how we treat people always have a community dynamic?
8. How would you describe the relationship between Paul and Philemon?
9. What does Paul mean by verse 6? What was the partnership they shared? What would it have looked like in practice for the partnership to be 'effective in deepening your understanding of every good thing we share for the sake of Christ'?
10. Are there areas or relationships in your life which are yet to be transformed by the Gospel? How can we be more open to God working in those areas?

Read Philemon 8-25

11. How was Paul's request much more than just taking Onesimus back? How would this have really challenged Philemon and those around him?
12. How do God's requests of us to demonstrate his love sometimes go against our culture/world?
13. What was the basis on which Paul was appealing to Philemon?
14. What's the danger of obeying out of guilt or obligation instead of love? When we're responding to God's requests in life, what might be the clues that reveal our true motivations?
15. How does Jesus both demonstrate and enable us to love in such a transforming way?

For application this week: Is there a challenging relationship in your life that could be transformed into a Gospel opportunity through the outpouring of God's love? What's one step this week that you can take in the right direction?

Talk 2/4 (Forgotten Letters of the New Testament): 6/11/16

“Philemon” by the Rev’d Adam Lowe

Bible Passage: Philemon

INTRODUCTION \ CONTEXT & SETTING

This is our second week in our series on ‘forgotten letters of the New Testament’.

- We’re taking four weeks to look at some of the *less-read* letters of the New Testament; *they’ve all been somewhat neglected, despite being phenomenal in their content and relevance.*
- So last week we commenced with Jude:
being really challenged to be growing in knowledge of God and relationship with God, especially in the context of a world full of false-teaching.
- This week we come to a really distinctive letter, a really personal book of the Bible, as Paul writes to his dear friend, Philemon, on how to **deal with a runaway slave.**
- That might not seem like the most relevant topic in 21st century Australia, but when we consider all that Paul has to say, this is a really practical case study of what it means to take the Gospel, *and let it be driven deep down into our everyday lives.*
- There are aspects of your life and my life, *that have remained untouched by the Gospel*, either because we’ve been blind to it or put it in the too hard basket, when God wants the Gospel to pervade through everything.
- And so, in a way, Paul is saying to Philemon, dear brother, I love you so much, the Gospel has so gripped your heart, now let it grip every dealing in your life.

There are two key threads running through the letter that I'd love us to focus on today.

- *The first part* is the nature and detail of the actual **appeal for reconciliation**.
The second part is that the **basis for that appeal, is love**.
- **So, (1) an appeal for reconciliation, (2) on the basis of love.**
- But before we do that, let's just get the *setting* right in our minds.
- So here we have Paul, the apostle, writing to Philemon his dear friend.
- Paul is in prison, **we know that because he alludes to it five times...**
(v.1) *he describes himself as a prisoner of Jesus Christ, not the normal intro as an Apostle;*
again in (v.9), *a prisoner of Jesus Christ*, (v.10) and (v.11), *as someone in chains*, and then he describes Epaphras as a *fellow prisoner* in v.23.
- So Paul's in prison, he wants his friend Philemon to understand that...
And it's clear, that Philemon became a follower of Jesus because of the *ministry of Paul*.
- Philemon is a Greek, a person of means, the Colossian church meets in his house.
- His extended family live with him, he has slaves, and his very well known, he's got a great reputation for the way in which the Good News about Jesus has been manifested through his generosity in the community.
- Paul says, that the way Philemon has loved people has given Paul great joy and encouragement as he has refreshed the hearts of the Lord's people.

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But even though this letter is personal, it's not just private correspondence.

- It's written to the whole household.
Apphia is probably Philemon's wife, Archippus is probably Philemon's son or an elder, Paul references the church that meets in your home.
- This personal matter, takes on a public dynamic by including others in the letter, so that there is a sense of accountability to lead Philemon to take the right path.
- Why? Because when it comes to following Jesus, even the private decisions we make, have a community dynamic, because we are part of one Body and God's Kingdom.
- And if that wasn't challenging enough, the very person who most likely delivers this letter, is Onesimus, *the slave who ran away and Paul is asking to be taken back.*
- *Since he ran away Onesimus has become a follower of Jesus too, and now he turns up to his old master, with a personal appeal to an entire household, from Philemon's dear friend, Paul.*
- It would have been pretty amazing to be in that room!
- Philemon would have had all sorts of thoughts running through his head seeing this lost slave again, but now as he looks at Onesimus, he's meant to see Paul, and receive an appeal with an entire household of witnesses.

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#1 AN APPEAL FOR RECONCILIATION \\\ BROTHER NOT SLAVE

So that's the background. Let's now look at the first thread of the letter, that Paul writes with an **appeal for reconciliation**.

8 Therefore, although in Christ I could be bold and order you to do what you ought to do, 9 yet I prefer to appeal to you on the basis of love. It is as none other than Paul—an old man and now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus— 10 **that I appeal to you for my son Onesimus**, who became my son while I was in chains. 11 Formerly he was useless to you, but now he has become useful both to you and to me. 12 I am sending him—who is my very heart—back to you.

This was a really big ask!

- We're not sure if Onesimus stole from Philemon, Paul doesn't confirm that, he just alludes to the possibility in verse 17, but even if he didn't, running away from your master in the Roman Empire could be punishable by death.
- A master could decide to kill their slave if they ran away.
- And then if Philemon doesn't punish Onesimus, he'd probably be wondering if he'll become a laughing stock to those around him.

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- What sort of example would this set for others? Would other slaves take off?
- It would be an incredible sign of weakness, of becoming a push over, *to take him back*.
- And then it seems like Onesimus *wasn't exactly the most helpful slave beforehand anyway*.
- So Philemon could be left wondering, well why bother because he was of no use.
- Paul, in a way is saying, I want you to take Onesimus back, and I know that requires:
putting aside punishment;
putting aside the flow on effect;
putting aside potential humiliation;
putting aside any previous cost he was to you;
putting aside how helpful he may or may not be,
- **Because this will be a tangible example of the effectiveness of your faith.**
- And if that wasn't enough, if that wasn't a big enough ask, I want you to not only take him back as a slave, but as a brother.

Paul feels like Philemon is the type of friend, because they're on such good standing, that he can ask for anything. I wonder if you have a friend like that? A friend who you know you could go to, and ask anything of - they might not say yes - but it would be perfectly okay to ask them? They wouldn't be offended. That's the type of relationship that Paul had with Philemon, but this is an audacious appeal.

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- Take him back, but not just as a slave, but as a brother.

15 Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back forever— 16 no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother. He is very dear to me but even dearer to you, both as a fellow man and as a brother in the Lord. 17 So if you consider me a partner, welcome him as you would welcome me.

- *Take him back. As a brother. Perhaps this is all part of the purposes of God unfolding. It would be no good just for things to go back to the way they were.*
- When Paul says, as a fellow man and as a brother in the Lord, he's saying not that Philemon would recognise him just spiritually as an equal, *after all many slaves had risen to positions of great responsibility,* but that he'd also welcome him back as a fellow man, *that is to say in the everyday affairs of work and life.*
- This is radical reconciliation that can only come about by radical forgiveness, so that the relationship is not just restored, but it's completely transformed.
- I wonder if you have got a relationship, in which you would love to see that type of reconciliation? Perhaps you've got a relationship in which that type of reconciliation terrifies you. It seems like too much. The forgiveness required seems beyond reach.
- Paul is so bold that in verse 21, that he says, I'm confident you'll do even more!

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More? Is that justified? How? Because this is part of what the Gospel looks like in action.

- **Note that Paul is not making a political statement about slavery.**
Part of the reason that this letter has been pushed to the side over the centuries is because of the apparent lack of Paul denouncing slavery.
- Although I'd add, that if you carry the implications of what Paul is saying to their proper end, it's going to actually only have one natural conclusion.
- **But that wasn't his purpose here.**
He's making a statement about how Christ transforms relationships.
- In the Roman Empire, slavery was common, in fact society dependent upon it.
- *Yet Paul does not shy away from the implications of this unsettling the very fabric of society.*
- That's what the Gospel looks like in action, starting at the grass roots level, changing and transforming lives because in Christ, we're equal members of God's family.
- It's not that the differences don't exist, it's just they're no longer the primary lens through which we look at people.
- **Paul even says, maybe this was all part of God's plan all along.**
- **This relational dilemma can become a gospel opportunity.**

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I wonder if you have any tricky relationships, that could become gospel opportunities?

- I wonder if there is a circumstance in your workplace, or your family, or with friends, which seems like a burden, it seems like a pain, but actually can become a gospel opportunity for reconciliation?
- Will it be costly? Absolutely!
- Might it mean putting aside your fears about justice, of the flow on effect, or you looking bad, or writing off past cost, or not even resulting in help?
- Absolutely.
- Will that feel hard and messy. Of course!
- Because when we live out the gospel in that way, we're letting God's kingdom, and the things that he values burst into and disrupt our world and our lives, and even our hearts.
- God's new way displaces humanity's way.

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#2 ON THE BASIS OF LOVE \\\ RIGHT ACTION WITH RIGHT HEART

It's an audacious appeal, and it can only ever happen on the basis of love.

- Paul could order Philemon to do it because of his authority.
Paul could call in a debt, because he had led him to the Lord.
Paul could guilt him to do it out of obligation.
- But he doesn't want him to do it for any of those reasons.
- He wants him to do it, on the basis of God's love being worked out in his life.

Therefore, although in Christ I could be bold and order you to do what you ought to do, I yet I prefer to appeal to you on the basis of love. (v.8-9)

- *What type of love?*
- Paul's spoken of Philemon's refreshing the *heart of the Lord's people* (v.7);
He's described Onesimus *as his very heart* (v.12);
He's asked Philemon to *fresh his own heart in Christ* (v.20).
- Each and every time, the word used for heart, actually refers to the gut or the entrails.

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- That's where ancient people believed love and compassion stemmed from. The only way we can possibly respond to an appeal like Paul is making, is through a love grounded in gut-wrenching compassion.
- That's the same compassion that Jesus was moved by when he saw his people like sheep without a shepherd. Or someone who was ill. Or those who were mourning. Or even the ones who mocked him.
- And it's the same love that led him to the cross for you and for me.
- Paul wanted Philemon to positively respond to his appeal, not out of grudging obedience, but out of a love reflecting and responding to the love that God has for us, and has shown to us.

One of my most favourite parts in a wedding ceremony is in the words of introduction when the couple being married are reminded - from Ephesians 5 - that the husband must love his wife like Christ loves the church and the wife must love the husband like the church loves Christ (that is, reciprocal, costly, sacrificial love), BECAUSE God has created marriage to be a symbol of his unending love for his people. That means, that the standard for love in Christian marriage is no less Jesus Christ.

- *And if you want to see what that looks like in practice, not just theory, look at the cross.*
- *Paul is challenging Philemon, to be reconciled to Onesimus not out of moral courage, or noble leadership, but by plumbing the depths of Christ's love.*

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- When your facing a relational challenge, searching for the Gospel opportunity, turn your mind to Jesus, and plumb the depths of his love.
- On the cross Jesus opened the way for humanity to be reconciled to God, *but he also opened the way through himself, that we might be reconciled to each other. //*

Over the years I can think of lots of examples in which I've been faced with stretching relationships. Challenging situations.

- I've often know what is the right thing to do.
What God would have me do.
- But it's really challenged me to do it out of love.
Sometimes I don't see it as gospel opportunity but gospel obligation.
- Heart of hearts, I think, I'll do it, but I'm not really happy about it.
- But friends, that simply won't do,
because being part of the enterprise of the Gospel,
is not about good and moral living,
it's about God's forgiving love,
made available through Christ, bursting into the world.
- Paul saw the opportunity for God's love to work through Philemon.
- God's love can work through you and me.

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