

Living in Grace

SESSION IN A SENTENCE: In Christ, God transforms relationships and makes His people a family that lives together with love and grace.

BACKGROUND PASSAGE: Philemon

? When you hear the word *slavery*, what comes to mind?

Slavery in the first century was based primarily on economics, not skin color. When Paul wrote his letter to Philemon, roughly a quarter of the population of the Roman Empire were slaves of one sort or another as the economy of Rome was based on slave labor. People were enslaved for various reasons: being prisoners of war, defaulting on a debt, being born into a slave family, and even voluntarily indenturing themselves to make ends meet. Furthermore, freedom for slaves was possible and common, being granted by masters or purchased through personal savings.¹

Group Time

Point 1: God's people are compelled by love (Philem. 8-14).

⁸ For this reason, although I have great boldness in Christ to command you to do what is right, ⁹ I appeal to you, instead, on the basis of love. I, Paul, as an elderly man and now also as a prisoner of Christ Jesus, ¹⁰ appeal to you for my son, Onesimus. I became his father while I was in chains. ¹¹ Once he was useless to you, but now he is useful both to you and to me. ¹² I am sending him back to you—I am sending my very own heart. ¹³ I wanted to keep him with me, so that in my imprisonment for the gospel he might serve me in your place. ¹⁴ But I didn't want to do anything without your consent, so that your good deed might not be out of obligation, but of your own free will.

For the believer, love is a driving force. Having been loved first by God through Christ's sacrifice and the Holy Spirit's sanctifying work, we respond with love, first for God and then for others (1 John 4:19). **God's love compels us to love.** Paul already recognized Philemon's love for the saints, and he was grateful for it because Paul was about to ask him to extend that same love to Onesimus, a new believer.



What are some ways Christians should be compelled to act because of God's love for us?

Paul was eager to emphasize Onesimus's conversion because the gospel changes the dynamic of all of our relationships even as it changes who we are. Before becoming a Christian, Onesimus did not live up to his name, which meant "useful" or "profitable." However, once he was born again, Onesimus could live up to his name. The love of God changed this sinner, and now he was able to love and serve others from the heart.

Point 2: God's people are related as family (Philem. 15-17).

¹⁵ For perhaps this is why he was separated from you for a brief time, so that you might get him back permanently, ¹⁶ no longer as a slave, but more than a slave—as a dearly loved brother. He is especially so to me, but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord.

¹⁷ So if you consider me a partner, welcome him as you would me.

Paul pondered the reason for Onesimus's temporary separation from Philemon. Believing in God's sovereignty and goodness, he concluded that God wanted Onesimus to join His family. We don't know all the details of why Onesimus ran away or whether or not he robbed Philemon of property. What we do know is that God's sovereign grace works through human affairs. Rather than dwelling on the past, Paul instead looked at the redemptive aspect of the cross in Onesimus's life—no longer merely a slave, now he was a brother in Christ among the people of God.



Voices from Church History

"Dear Mr. Spurgeon ... While crossing the Atlantic, last September, and looking out upon its proud dashing billows and their varied forms, and thinking of the diversity in the human family, I remarked that 'we are many as the waves, but we are one as the sea.'"¹

—Frederick Douglass
(1817-1895)

People of God: Scripture describes the church as "the people of God." Comprised of both Jew and Gentile, the church is created by God through the _____ of _____. As the people of God, the church seeks to live under God's ruling care while we are protected and cared for by Him.

Philemon had a choice to follow the gracious, forgiving option Paul presented or the harsh societal standard for how to deal with a runaway slave. Paul hoped and expected Philemon would choose to see Onesimus as family, even welcoming him as Philemon would have welcomed Paul into his home. The gospel not only redeems sinners, it transforms societal conventions and makes people one in Christ Jesus (Gal. 3:28).



How have you seen the gospel unify people as family in Christ?

Point 3: God's people are gracious with each other (Philem. 18-22).

¹⁸ And if he has wronged you in any way, or owes you anything, charge that to my account. ¹⁹ I, Paul, write this with my own hand: I will repay it—not to mention to you that you owe me even your very self. ²⁰ Yes, brother, may I benefit from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in Christ. ²¹ Since I am confident of your obedience, I am writing to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say. ²² Meanwhile, also prepare a guest room for me, since I hope that through your prayers I will be restored to you.

In his pursuit to reconcile Onesimus with Philemon as brothers in Christ, Paul added his willingness to take on any burden that Onesimus had caused Philemon—a fittingly Christlike gesture (Gal. 6:2). Paul did not overlook the consequences of Onesimus's decision to run away; instead, he recognized the potential offense committed against Philemon. And in a picture of gospel grace, Paul was willing to take up Onesimus's offense and lay it on himself to restore their relationship.



How should believers respond to other believers who have wronged them?

Essentially, Paul was asking Philemon to forgive Onesimus. Forgiveness often does not come easy because it comes with a cost. It means letting go of the past, letting go of the anger, letting go of the sense of moral superiority. Forgiveness requires this sacrifice, yet it is a noble act expected of Christians, who have received the grace and forgiveness of God themselves. For this reason, Paul was confident that Philemon would obey his request and welcome Onesimus home as a beloved brother in Christ.



What might explain a professing Christian's choice to withhold forgiveness from another believer?

Daily Study

Day 1: Read Philemon 1-7

The Letter to Philemon is a short letter. Paul was succinct and direct in his brotherly exhortation to Philemon.

Paul opened by identifying himself as a prisoner for Christ, and he identified Philemon as a fellow worker in the Lord, one who provided space in his home for the gathering of the church in his city. Paul's purpose in writing was that he wanted Philemon to accept and restore Onesimus, a runaway slave who had belonged to his estate.

A couple of components balance out the letter: 1) Paul's strong friendship with Philemon, and 2) his desire to help his new son in the faith, Onesimus.

Slavery in the first century of the Roman world was common since the government accepted and promoted the practice. As we might expect, some slaves took the opportunity to run from their masters. Onesimus had run away, and the penalty for doing so would have been severe. No doubt Onesimus was aware of this. But he agreed with Paul to return to his master as one of the people delivering Paul's Letter to the Colossians (Col. 4:9).

Paul's prayer for Philemon at the beginning of his personal letter stressed the love and generosity that Philemon habitually showed to the people of God and how this had been a joy and comfort for Paul during his imprisonment (vv. 4-7). Accordingly, Paul would request later in the letter that he show that same love to Onesimus, their new brother in Christ.



With whom could you pursue a mentoring relationship like Paul did with others?

Day 2: Read Philemon 8-14

Paul sent Onesimus back to Philemon using the language of “son” to describe Onesimus. He spoke of Timothy as a child (1 Cor. 4:17) and also of Titus as a son (Titus 1:4). He spoke similarly in a collective way about the Corinthian church (1 Cor. 4:14) along with the Galatian believers (Gal. 4:19).

Paul communicated that Philemon’s duty as a fellow Christian transcended his role as a master. Paul understood well Philemon’s rights but nonetheless insisted that he consider his Christian identity above his societal identity.

This section of Paul’s letter vividly illustrates for us the profound picture of the believer’s relationship with Christ. This picture of reconciliation crystallizes a Christian understanding of relationships transformed by and rooted in God’s grace.



When have you stood up for and defended a fellow believer?

Day 3: Read Philemon 15-17

Paul suggested that Philemon and Onesimus’s relationship should undergo a transformation. Truly, a relationship in Christ transcends race, ethnicity, and socio-economic status. In Christ, a new relationship now existed between Philemon and Onesimus. Because of what Christ did on the cross to bring salvation, making peace between people and God and with others, all other matters of relationship, all the details that divide in a sinful world, have been made subject to God’s glorious grace.

Paul was confident and hopeful that Philemon would embrace his new relationship with Onesimus since both of these men were now fellow Christians. Only the gospel of Jesus Christ can bring unity and restoration so beautifully.



Which relationship in your life has changed most dramatically because of your identity in Christ?

Day 4: Read Philemon 18-22

In Christ, God transforms relationships and makes His people a family that lives together with love and grace.

Paul appealed to Philemon on behalf of this runaway slave, Onesimus. Paul interceded for him to the point of stating his own willingness to take on any of Onesimus's debt to Philemon. He demonstrated his brotherly affection not simply by words but also by deeds.

Paul was more concerned about Onesimus's well-being and the reconciliation between Philemon and Onesimus than about his own welfare. Paul modeled Christlikeness as a peacemaker in this situation. Christ Himself is *the* peacemaker because He went between God and fallen humanity, paying the price rightly owed by us.



Which relationships in your life could benefit the most from your acting as a peacemaker?

Day 5: Read Philemon 1-25

Rereading Paul's Letter to Philemon as a whole, we notice quickly that Paul bookended his letter with statements of grace toward Philemon (vv. 3,25). The word "grace" is not mentioned elsewhere in the letter, but the entire message is dripping with grace in two notable ways.

First, while it was customary in the first century to greet someone with "Grace and peace" as an introduction to a letter, Paul's greetings proclaimed truth (v. 3). This wasn't an ethereal "Hope you are doing well," but a concrete declaration and reminder—"Philemon, you are covered by the grace and peace of God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." In Jesus, we have *peace* with God, and this is far more than we could ever deserve, hence, *grace*.

Second, Paul prayed for grace to attend Philemon's spirit (v. 25), yet another reminder of the grace we have through faith in Christ. But this also doubles as a prayer of encouragement for Philemon's obedience—that Philemon wouldn't just receive God's grace but would act on it. Philemon had been loved and welcomed by God in grace; now the call was upon him to love and welcome his new brother in Christ in grace.



How will you act in grace toward others today because of God's grace?

