

The Gospel on Display

Philemon (August 15)

INTRODUCTION:

- Option: Study the context. Have the class look at study Bibles and other resources to learn the background of Philemon and the big picture of this short book. Some points:
 - Philemon is the most personal of all the letters in the NT.
 - It is the only inspired letter written to a layperson.
 - Verse 1 infers that this is a Prison Epistle.
- Don't let the size of Philemon fool you! This small book packs quite a punch! It is a beautiful picture of the difference that the cross of Jesus Christ makes in the lives of people.
- Make no mistake: When Jesus comes into a life, He transforms that life into a new creation! Jesus makes the difference!

BIBLE STUDY:

1. Philemon: A Refreshing Saint (vs. 1-7)
 - a. What do we learn about Philemon in these verses?
 - i. He was loved by Paul (vs. 1), and Paul considered him a co-laborer.
 - ii. Philemon hosted a church in his home (vs. 2).
 - iii. The language in verses 3-7 reveal a deep love that Paul had for this man. From Paul's point of view, Philemon was a transformed man, a refreshing saint of the Lord Jesus Christ.
 - iv. Verse 19 seems to indicate that Paul had won this man to Christ.
 - b. In verse 5, Paul refers specifically to Philemon's love and faith. These two qualities should characterize the life of every believer. Verse 5 reveals how these two areas are to manifest themselves in the Christian:
 - i. Our faith is toward the Lord Jesus.
 1. There was a reality to Philemon's relationship with the Lord that was evident.
 2. Verse 6 points out that his life was "effectual." In other words, he shared his faith.
 - ii. Our love is toward others.
 1. Philemon didn't just reach upward, he reached outward to others.
 2. It wasn't socially favorable to be a Christian in the Roman Empire. Yet Philemon risked his personal freedom to even host a church in his home.
 - c. Jesus had made a tremendous difference in the life of Philemon.
2. Onesimus: A Reclaimed Slave (vs. 8-16)
 - a. One of the interesting things about this little letter is that Paul is appealing to Philemon to reevaluate his view of Onesimus, Philemon's runaway slave (vs. 8-11).
 - b. Paul simply requested that Philemon consider what he had to say. Instead of law, Paul dealt with Philemon with love, the love that Philemon himself exercised toward others.
 - c. Paul's gentle approach remains a stroke of genius: if Philemon's reach in life is God-ward and built on love to others, Paul's unspoken question would be, why does Onesimus not receive the same love others receive from Philemon?
 - d. Paul reveals to Philemon two significant factors concerning Onesimus that Philemon has yet to learn.
 - i. First, Onesimus experiences a miserable condition (v. 11). Undoubtedly, Onesimus ran away ideally thinking he was obtaining his freedom. Yet, instead of being free, Onesimus ended up in a cold dungeon as a criminal alongside the Apostle Paul. Some freedom!

- ii. Second, Onesimus experiences a marvelous conversion. Until now Onesimus never lived up to his name. However, Paul now speaks “for my son Onesimus, whom I have begotten in my bonds.” Just as Paul was Philemon’s father in the faith, he is also Onesimus’ father in the faith, seeing him converted to Christ under his care.
 - e. The implications are staggering. In God’s own providence, Onesimus met up with the Apostle Paul in a prison cell. Consequently, the slave who all his life had been “useless” was now a free man in Jesus Christ, useful and profitable for every good work.
 - f. In addition, Paul counsels Philemon to not be quick to judge his wayward slave. In fact, God was working in the entire matter (vs. 15). While Onesimus craved societal freedom, God wanted to give him spiritual freedom!
 - g. Never condemning Philemon, the Apostle nevertheless prodded him toward accepting a slave as a man to be respected, not an asset to be returned.
 - h. Even more, Paul pushed the parameters of accepted Roman culture to breathtaking limits. Onesimus was more than a slave, he was a man made in God’s image.
 - i. Paul’s logic is impeccable. Onesimus was more than a slave, he was a brother in the Lord. What a mighty God we serve!
3. Paul: A Redemptive Soul-Winner (vs. 17-25)
- a. The redemptive attitude that Paul possesses toward slaves of sin remains a remarkable inspiration for all Christians today.
 - b. In this section, the greatest soul-winner in the Christian church reveals two fundamental doctrines which demonstrate how God deals with sin damaged goods in poor lost souls in slavery to sin.
 - c. First, Paul explains reconciliation to God because of the distance sin has driven us from God.
 - i. Paul earlier mentioned the need for reconciliation between Philemon and his runaway slave, Onesimus. In short, Paul asked Philemon to give him a guest room and no longer keep him locked up in the slave’s quarters.
 - ii. Genuine salvation always brings one from sin’s pigpen to heaven’s penthouse.
 - d. Second, Paul explains substitution by God because of the debt of sin we cannot pay to God.
 - i. Not only does God take the initiative in reconciliation to sinful human beings, He lays everything on the line, making a full sacrifice for our sins.
 - ii. To Philemon, Paul requests if he suffered loss because of Onesimus, he was to “put that on my account” (v. 18). Paul was willing to bear the punishment and pay the debt himself for Onesimus.
 - iii. Paul’s example is an authentic picture of substitution, the very substitution Jesus gave when He bore our sin debt on Calvary’s cross.
 - e. In closing, Paul offers his profound confidence Philemon would be merciful to Onesimus (v. 21). He further is confident he will see Philemon face to face. Hence, he encourages him to save a guest room for him (v. 22). Other fellow workers in the Gospel have a rich reward awaiting them (v. 23), and the Apostle is convinced Jesus will continue to watch over souls until He comes for them (v. 25).

APPLICATION:

- What difference has Jesus made in your life? Is your faith noticeable to those around you?
- This book makes the point that you can’t love God and refuse to forgive your brother. Is there anyone in your life you need to forgive?
- How do you tend to view people? Do you see them as image bearers of God? How should this impact your daily life?
- Look at the impact Paul had by simply being a witness where he was (a jail cell)! How can we do better in this area?