

Jesus Changes Everything (Philemon)

Big Idea: Our relationship with Jesus changes our relationships with each other.

I've got a problem.

I took one of those personality assessments a few years back. It was very helpful. They divided people into four temperament types. One of the divisions was between abstract and concrete communicators.

- Abstract communicators primarily talk about the inner world of ideas, beliefs, ideals.
- Concrete communicators talk about the external world around them.

Everybody does both, but most people will choose one or the other for the major of their conversations. You're probably mostly an abstract or a concrete communicator.

Here's my problem. I tend to be an abstract communicator. That means I'm very comfortable talking about ideas, but sometimes I need help bringing those ideas down to reality and showing what they mean in the everyday world.

That's why the letter of Philemon is going to help.

For the past few months, we've been going through the letter of Colossians. It's a letter written from jail by the apostle Paul to the church in Colossae to address a problem there. The problem was the same problem we face in every generation: it's tempting to add something to the work of Jesus. That's what the Colossians were doing.

They were taking other ideas and mixing them in with the gospel. Paul wrote to tell them: nothing needs to be added to Jesus. He is more than enough.

That was very good news for the Colossians, and it's good news for us today. Whenever we start to drift from or add to Jesus, Colossians pulls us back. Stay close to Jesus. Never wander away. He's got everything you need, so never look anywhere else.

Paul does get practical in Colossians. We had four really practical sermons at the end of our series on living out our new identity, letting the gospel shape our relationships, living evangelistically, and also needing people. But I can still imagine somebody saying, "I'm not that abstract. Show me what it means."

If that's you, if you want to see the message of Colossians applied, then today is for you. Today is going to be a very practical application of the message of Colossians and how it changes everything.

Introducing Philemon

What does Philemon have to do with Colossians?

It's written about a man named Onesimus, a slave. Colossians 4:7-9 says:

Tychicus will tell you all about my activities. He is a beloved brother and faithful minister and fellow servant in the Lord. I have sent him to you for this very purpose, that you may know how we are and that he may encourage your hearts, and with him Onesimus, our faithful and beloved brother, who is one of you. They will tell you of everything that has taken place here.

In other words, Onesimus is a member of the Colossian church, and Paul's sending him back to Colossae with the letter.

But there's a big problem. When Onesimus returns to the church in Colossae, he faces a situation with his master Philemon. Read verses 10 to 12 and 15-16:

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 ... For this perhaps is why he was parted from you for a while, that you might have him back forever, no longer as a bondservant but more than a bondservant, as a beloved brother – especially to me, but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord.

Here's what we know.

- Onesimus is Philemon's slave.
- He's been away from Philemon for a while.
- Something's happened to Onesimus while he's been away. Paul's become his spiritual father during his imprisonment. It seems that Onesimus became a follower of Christ through Paul's ministry.
- Paul is now sending him back to Philemon, as required by law.
- Now, Paul is concerned with how Philemon will respond to Onesimus when he returns.

It's a little like hearing one side of a telephone conversation. You have to piece together what's going on. The majority throughout church history have pieced all of this together and concluded that Onesimus had wronged Philemon, ran away, and had evi-

dently crossed paths with Paul. He had become a believer, helping Paul in his ministry. Paul wanted to send Onesimus back to Philemon as required by Roman law.

But Onesimus was guilty of a capital crime. By law, slaveowners had the right to punish or execute runaway slaves. He could be branded on the forehead with F for *Fugitivus* (Fugitive) or CF for *Cave Furem* (Beware of thief!). He could be killed. Or both.

And so when Paul sent the letter to the Colossians, he also sent Onesimus back with this letter for Philemon with a delicate request: welcome Onesimus back as he would welcome Paul, not as a runaway slave but as a brother (v. 17).

It's one thing to say that Jesus is enough. It's fine to say that nothing needs to be added to Jesus. He is more than enough. But let's stop being so abstract and get really concrete.

How does the fact that Jesus is enough change us when we face really complex and difficult situations in our lives? When someone wrongs us? When we've got to forgive somebody for a wrong they've committed against us? When we face a tension between what they deserve and what we're entitled to exact from them?

Three Lessons

Let's see what Paul teaches us about how to apply the idea that Jesus is enough.

Three lessons:

First: The gospel changes our relationships.

Paul prays in verses 6-7:

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.

When Paul writes about “the sharing of your faith” he’s not talking about evangelism. He’s talking about Philemon’s sharing of his faith with other believers. Philemon believed in Jesus. He’s heard the good news of who Jesus is and what he’s done. Not only has Philemon believed in Jesus, but his life shows it. He’s refreshed other saints, including Paul.

And now Paul prays that his faith would become even more “effective for the full knowledge of every good thing that is in us for the sake of Jesus Christ.” Paul wants his faith to affect his relationships with fellow believers.

Here’s what Paul is praying: it’s great to believe that Jesus is all that we need. And it’s great if that leads to us loving and serving other believers. But Paul wants more. He wants this knowledge of Jesus to affect his relationships with other believers. As Doug Moo paraphrases this prayer:

Philemon, I am praying that the mutual participation that arises from your faith in Christ might become effective in leading you to understand and put into practice all the good that God wills for us and that is found in our community; and do all this for the sake of Christ.

Here’s what Paul teaches us: the gospel must make a difference in our relationships. It’s got to go deep in terms of how we love and treat each other. We’ll spend the rest of our lives going deeper into this, putting into practice what it means that Jesus is

enough. One of the key ways this shows up is in how we treat each other. Let's pray that we keep growing in this area.

The gospel changes our relationships.

Second: The gospel breaks down barriers.

Who was Onesimus? A slave. There were different kinds of slaves in the Greco-Roman world, some better than others, but none of them good. Slaves were considered non-persons. They had no rights. They had no privacy or control over even the most intimate areas of their lives.

But who was Onesimus once he became a believer in Jesus? A brother in Christ.

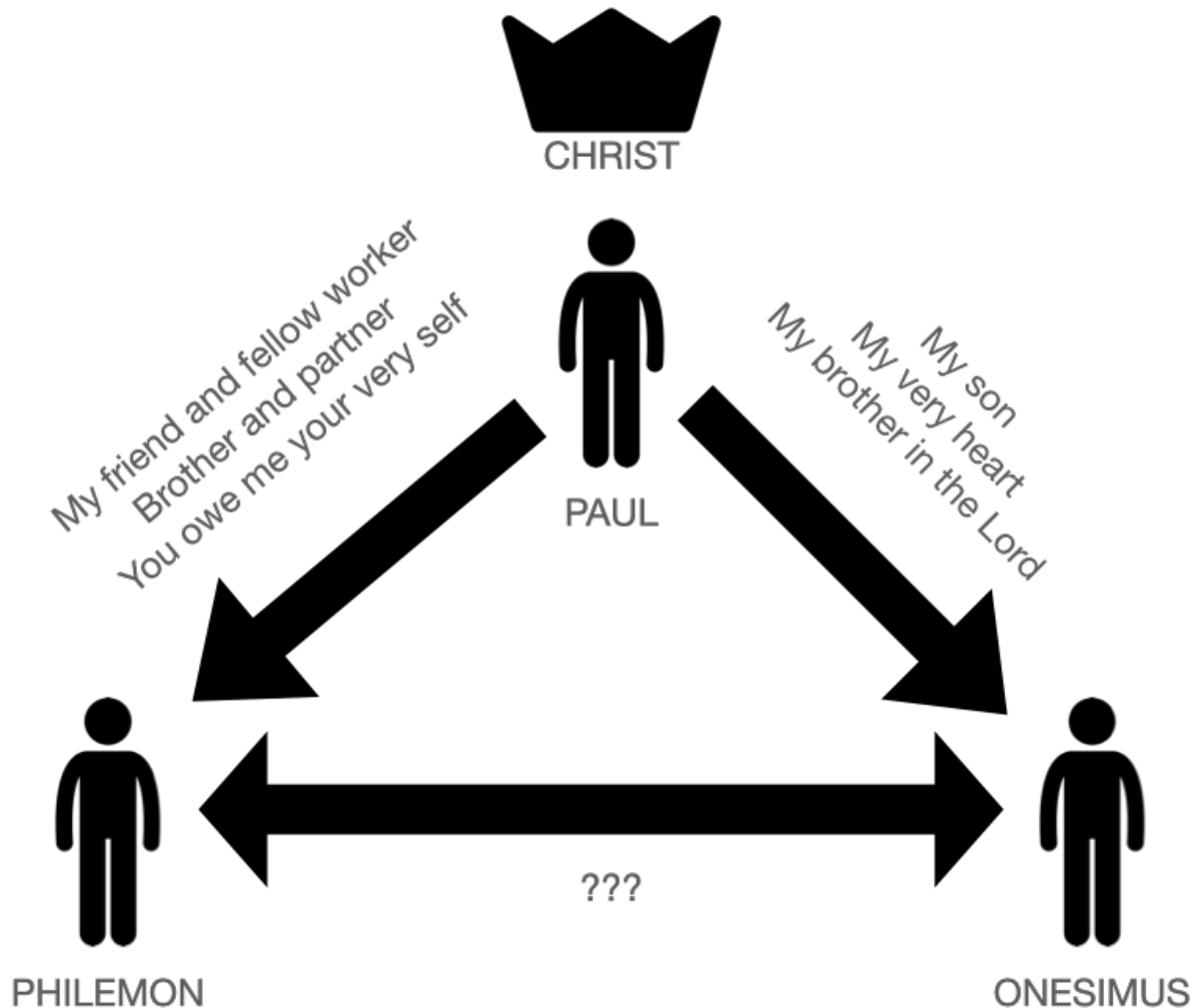
For this perhaps is why he was parted from you for a while, that you might have him back forever, no longer as a bondservant but more than a bondservant, as a beloved brother—especially to me, but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord. (Philemon 15-16)

In Colossians, Paul had written, "Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all" (Colossians 3:11). That's the abstract idea. And now here's the concrete reality, lived out: slaves and masters have been transformed into brothers and sisters in Christ.

A key verse is verse 17: "So if you consider me your partner, receive him as you would receive me." Paul sees Onesimus as his child and his very heart. Since Paul sees him this way, it's natural that if Philemon loves Paul he'll see him that way too.

The primary thing that defines us is not our social status, our position in society, or our privilege. The primary thing that defines our relationship with other believers is that we are brothers and sisters in Christ.

Here's the main thing that I want to get across today: **our relationship with Jesus changes our relationships with each other.** I came across this chart in [Colossians and Philemon For You](#):



We're in the middle of celebrating Advent. Advent is about our longing for our Savior to come. When he does come, he sets the world right. He satisfies our longings. He reverses the broken order of things. The world is as it was meant to be.

When Jesus comes, he reigns over us. And when he reigns over us, he transforms our relationships with others. Barriers break down. The things that separate us no longer matter because we have the same King.

The gospel breaks down barriers, transforms relationships, and unites believers. The minute Paul wrote these verses, he drove a nail in the coffin of slavery. He was sitting in prison and had no power to overthrow slavery, but the gospel did. As the ESV Study Bible puts it, "There is no doubt that it would have been difficult for the institution of slavery to survive in the atmosphere of love created by the letter, and in fact the elements of Paul's appeal found in this letter helped lay the foundation for the abolition of slavery."

The gospel changes relationships, and it also breaks down barriers.

Finally: The gospel doesn't demand this; it just invites it.

Here's what I love about Philemon. There's only one command in the whole letter, and it's found in verse 22: "Prepare a guest room for me." Paul never commands Philemon to treat Onesimus differently. He just invites Philemon to do so. If Paul had commanded, Philemon could have responded obediently but grudgingly. But Paul wants Philemon to respond not just out of obligation but from the heart. Read verse 14: "I preferred to do nothing without your consent in order that your goodness might not be by compulsion but of your own accord."

Colossians tells us that Jesus is enough. Philemon shows us what this looks like in one of the trickiest situations that anybody could ever face. If Jesus is enough, then that changes how we relate to others, even when it's really difficult.

How has Jesus treated you? If Jesus received you, how could we not receive others that Jesus has received?

The coming of Jesus turns enemies into friends. As Mary sang when pregnant with Jesus, "he has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate" (Luke 1:52). Jesus transforms our relationships so that slaves become brothers, and enemies become friends.

If Jesus is enough, then that changes how we relate to others, even when it's hard.