

Philemon 2 - Grace

1. Turn to Philemon.

a.

2. Read Philemon 10-14

- a. *10 I beseech thee for my son Onesimus, whom I have begotten in my bonds: 11 Which in time past was to thee unprofitable, but now profitable to thee and to me: 12 Whom I have sent again: thou therefore receive him, that is, mine own bowels: 13 Whom I would have retained with me, that in thy stead he might have ministered unto me in the bonds of the gospel: 14 But without thy mind would I do nothing; that thy benefit should not be as it were of necessity, but willingly.*

3. Questions

a. What kind of a servant was he?

- b. It's difficult to discuss this story without touching briefly upon the topic of slavery. When I spent that year studying Philemon, I spent the majority of that time reading books about slavery in the Bible and slavery in the Roman Empire. That is a massive, complicated subject, and I am no expert. Now some would argue that we have more slavery today than ever before. Today we have forced marriages and forced conversions in the middle east and in Africa. We have slave labor, child labor, and human trafficking. And if you ask me, anyone who lives in places like North Korea or China are living under forms of slavery. The forms of slavery that exist today are different than the forms of slavery that existed like at the birth of our nation. Back then, human beings were abducted and brought to this country for slave labor, which was absolutely diabolical. But, see, that system of slavery was different than what existed in the Roman Empire. And when it comes to the Roman Empire, you can't even nail down that system because it was constantly evolving, particularly under Claudius who kept expanding the rights of slaves. And that system under the Roman Empire wasn't similar to the systems that existed under the gentile world empires of the OT, which were totally brutal. And yet, God viewed those systems of slavery in the OT as acceptable forms of punishment for His people when they fell into idolatry, which was an act of mercy on His part because God had every right to do worse and even wipe them off the face of the earth for their idolatry. And yet, when God put His people into slavery under a gentile empire in the OT, He always got the results He wanted. Under those systems of bondage, the people always turned their hearts back to God, and *then* He'd then set them free.
- c. And what we find under the Mosaic law can't really be called slavery. I think the translators were correct in using the word "servant" because the Mosaic law was what I'd call "a highly regulated system of servants." It was at times a tough system, but it was always fair, always righteous. God wanted all His servants under the Mosaic law to be believers. He wanted the men to be circumcised. He

wanted them to be recipients of the covenants of promise. He wanted His people to treat them as family, and He wanted them to enjoy all the rights and privileges of Israel. Not to mention the fact that in Lev. 25 and Deut. 25, God instituted the Year of Jubilee. Every 50 years, all servants freed, all debts released! You also had in the Mosaic law the idea of the Kinsmen Redeemer in which it was the duty of a kinsman to buy back his brother fallen into slavery. So if a Jew couldn't pay off his debts and had to sell himself as a servant to pay off his debts, his kinsman redeemer would buy him back, which was a portrait of Christ, who will come back and free all of His enslaved people. They will be freed from all bondage, all property restored, all debts paid, all sins forgiven.

- d. **But you had both in the Roman Empire and in the Mosaic law** the idea of the bondservant. If you got yourself into debt and you couldn't pay it off, then you would have to sell yourself as a servant. Someone would pay your debt and then you'd work off that debt under that new master. Once that debt was paid off, the servant could become free or choose to continue to serve that master. There's nothing immoral about that system. We're spoiled today. If we can't pay off our debts, we file chapter 11, and we're done. But in the olden days, people had to physically work off their debts. I think this is what Onesimus was. I think his reckless behavior in this story is indicative of how he became a servant to begin with. He probably got into some financial difficulties, had to sell himself to work off his debts, and then decided that life is too short, and I'm just going to runaway and do my own thing. In vs. 16, Paul identifies him as a servant, a *doulos* in the Greek. *Doulos* is just a broad term that means either voluntary or involuntary servant. Sometimes *doulos* is translated as *bondmen* in Rev. Paul called himself *doulos*, that is, a servant of Jesus Christ, and I think he always had in mind the bondservant, the one whose debt was paid by another and had been set free but now he willingly chooses to serve his new master.
- e. **If Philemon had a grace church in his house, why wasn't Onesimus saved?**
- f. Some people try to use this argument to suggest that maybe Philemon didn't allow his servants to be part of his church, and it's somehow Philemon's fault that Onesimus wasn't saved. Let me tell you something. If Philemon was in any way to be blamed for anything, Paul would have addressed that in his letter. So then why wasn't Onesimus saved? The same reason many aren't saved. **1Co 1:18** *For the preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness...*
- g. **Why did Onesimus run?**
- h. Why do unbelievers do what they do? **Eph 2:2** They're walking "*according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that now worketh in the children of disobedience.*" But after Onesimus ran away, I think he discovered that sometimes freedom means you have more ways to be lost. And he may have realized that sometimes freedom means that you're imprisoned in new ways you never imagined before. Most people in the world view civil liberties as freedom. Civil liberties is not true freedom. That's a form of

freedom, but that's not true freedom. God cares about a greater form of freedom that He gives anyone who comes to Him in faith no matter what form of government they live under. True freedom is salvation through the gospel which frees you from the eternal condemnation of sin. And true freedom is even more than even that! True freedom is in what God has made you in His Son – dead, buried, and risen with Him, the old you crucified with Christ, and you are literally right now freed from the bondage of sin in your life! Rom. 6:22 *“But now being made free from sin, and become servants to God, ye have your fruit unto holiness, and the end everlasting life.”* God made you free from sin! Freedom from the condemnation of sin, freedom from the power of sin, is true freedom your soul has always longed for! That is true freedom that God Himself has given you! If words have any meaning at all, then Paul operating under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit means exactly what he says. We are *dead, indeed, unto sin!* We are *freed from sin!* We were *made free from sin*, and we *became the servants of righteousness!* We are alive unto God as righteous as His Son! Sin no longer has any dominion over your soul! The only power sin has over you is the power you give it in your mind. So reckon yourself to be free! The true freedom God gives you is designed to make you free under *any* form of government! **I always found this thought interesting.** When Onesimus went to visit Paul in prison, which one was truly free? Paul was in prison, but he was freed from sin because of God's grace. And yet, Onesimus was free, but he was imprisoned by his sin.

i. Back to Onesimus. What exactly did Onesimus steal?

- j. I think he needed money and transportation. So he probably stole expensive things he could barter. Jewelry. Money. And I think he stole a horse. I think he rode that horse all the way to the coast to Miletus. He sold the horse and took a boat to Rome, because you know that boat trip wasn't cheap.
- k. Interesting to me that some people were frustrated by vs. 18 in that Paul didn't specify what Onesimus stole, but I love it! I love that Paul was broad in his statement there because he was happy to cover both the real and the perceived wrongs. Philemon may have thought that Onesimus stole more than he actually did. But that didn't matter to Paul. He was willing to cover everything.

l. How is it that Onesimus met Paul?

- m. A lot of books would paint this picture of Paul shackled in prison. Onesimus must've done something stupid. Got arrested. And he just so happened to be thrown into the same prison as Paul. Paul struck up a conversation with him. One thing leads to another and – voila! – we have this letter to Philemon.
- n. That's not what happened. We know from Acts 28:30 that Paul was not in a prison. He was in his own *hired house* in which he was free to receive visitors. The only way Onesimus met Paul was if he voluntarily went to see him. And he would've known about Paul *because* of the church in Philemon's house.

o. Why would Onesimus voluntarily go see Paul?

- p. You know, people are most open to the gospel when they've hit bottom. I think Onesimus absolutely hit bottom in Rome. He knew he was in big trouble.
- i. **First of all**, he couldn't get a job. If you were in Rome and you had a business and you were caught employing a runaway servant, you'd be brutally whipped and fined an exorbitant sum of money. So if your master had set you free, you would go before a judge and get proper documentation to prove manumission, that you were now a freeman. Without that documentation, nobody would hire Onesimus.
 - ii. **Not only that**, catching runaway slaves was big business in Rome. They were called the *fugitivarii*. I read that, "If caught, fugitives could be punished by being whipped, burnt with iron, or killed." Sometimes, fugitives were tossed to the lions in the Coliseum. "Those who lived were branded on the forehead with the letters FUG, for *fugitivus*." Some books talked about seeing posters for runaway servants in the city of Rome.
 - iii. **So Onesimus got to Rome**, thinking he would blend in and be anonymous and safe, and Rome turned out to be the biggest nightmare of his life. He was scared he was gonna die! I don't think he went to Paul hoping to talk him into persuading Philemon to take him back. I think he went to Paul hoping to get right with God before he'd be caught and killed.
 - iv. **And did you know** that Paul actually broke the Mosaic Law by sending Onesimus back to Philemon? In Deut. 23:15-16, if you encountered a runaway servant, you were strictly forbidden from sending him back to his original master. He had to be given a new master. Why did Paul break the law? Isn't the old law a kind of moral guidepost for us today? No, it isn't. Why? Because grace, pure grace, not only fulfills the law by love, but grace also rises above the law in a sphere all its own to God's glory.

4. How the Story Ends

- a. **Hold you place here and get with me Col. 4.** We're going to flip back and forth between those two books. Now most books say that Philemon lived in Colosse because Onesimus and Archippus are mentioned in Col. 4, which isn't correct if you study the context. Philemon was in Laodicea. And so they assume that Philemon and Colossians were written at the same time and sent out at the same time, and we don't know what the decision was Philemon made. That's not what happened at all. If those letters were written at the same time, then why didn't Paul include the message for Archippus in the letter to Philemon? That makes no sense. Also, if you carefully study the names in Philemon and Colossians 4, it's very apparent that there was a significant amount of time between the writing of those two letters. At the end of Philemon, Paul mentions 5 names of men who were with him. In Col. 4, he mentions 7 names, which now include Justus and Tychicus. If these two letters were written at the same time, why weren't Justus and Tychicus mentioned in Philemon? **Now look at this.**

- b. **Look at vs. 23. Phm 1:23** *There salute thee Epaphras, my fellowprisoner in Christ Jesus.* Notice that Epaphras is a *fellowprisoner*. **Then notice in vs. 24**, Aristarchus is mentioned, and he's one of the *fellowlabourers*. So Epaphras is a *fellowprisoner* and Aristarchus is only a *fellowlabourer*. But see, it's just the opposite in Colossians 4. Flip over to Col. 4. **Look at vs. 10. Col 4:10** *Aristarchus my fellowprisoner saluteth you...* He was only a *fellowlabourer* in Philemon. Now he's a *fellowprisoner*. **Look at vs. Col 4:12** *Epaphras, who is one of you, a servant of Christ...* In Philemon, Epaphras was a *fellowprisoner*. Now he's only called a *servant of Christ*. So between the writing of Philemon and Colossians Epaphras was released from prison and Aristarchus was put into prison. That doesn't happen overnight. We know that justice moved at a snail's pace in the city of Rome. How long did Paul wait for his trial before he was released? A long time. All of this indicates that there was a significant amount of time between the writing of these two letters. There's no way they were written together.
- c. **But the biggest slam dunk argument** is the reference in Col. 4:16 to *the epistle from Laodicea*. If you establish, as we did yesterday, that *the epistle from Laodicea* had to be the letter to Philemon, then you quickly realize that Paul is telling them to read a letter that had already been sent. He tells them "*that ye likewise read the epistle from Laodicea*". Paul's epistle was already IN Laodicea because Paul had already sent that letter to Philemon! There is no way that these two letters were written and sent out at the same time.
- d. **This is what I believe happened.** Paul sent Onesimus to Laodicea with this letter to Philemon. Philemon melted when he read this letter. He rejoiced! Not only that, the grace of God was absolutely working in him as Paul had hoped. He not only received Onesimus as a *brother beloved*, but he also did more than Paul asked for and he gave him freedom! And the very fact that Onesimus is mentioned in Col. 4:9 means that we have our answer! It means that we now know what Philemon did! He gave Onesimus back to Paul with all his blessings, and Onesimus being sent to minister to the saints in Colosse was probably his first major assignment given to him by the Apostle Paul.

5. Illustration of Imputation

- a. **I learned this from Jordan. I give him credit.** Remember the patterns of three? There are three major imputations in Scripture: the imputation of Adam's sin to all mankind, the imputation of man's sin to Christ, and the imputation of God's righteousness to the believer. We have in this story, three major figures: Onesimus, Paul, and Philemon. When a person gets saved, you also have three major figures: the sinner, Christ, and God the Father. The sinner, recognizing his ruin, comes to Christ in faith. "I have sinned. I have committed wrong. I'm sorry." Christ turns to God the Father, and he says, "This sinner has come to me in faith. I will repay. Allow my sacrifice on the cross at Calvary to cover all his sins. Receive him. Receive him as if you were receiving me." And then God the Father agrees. He imputes the rightness of His Son's sacrifice on the cross to the

sinner's account, and He receives that sinner as if He was receiving Jesus Christ Himself. The sinner becomes identified with Christ and what Christ accomplished on the cross, which is how God the Father is able to receive that sinner as if He was receiving Christ Himself, because of that identification, because that sinner is now and forever one with that atoning work of Christ. Through Christ's intercession, His righteousness gets imputed to the sinner and now he is freed from all condemnation, and he is made able to serve God because of His grace.

- b. The same is true for this story in Philemon. Onesimus came to Paul. He says, "I have sinned. I have committed wrong. I'm sorry." Paul takes him to the cross. Onesimus gets saved. Then we're given here an illustration of imputation by the manner in which Paul handles this whole the matter when he writes Philemon. Paul turns to Philemon. He says, "This sinner has come to me and accepted Christ by faith. I will repay all the wrong he has done to you. Receive him. Receive him as if you were receiving me." Just as Christ bore the burden for all our sins on the cross, Paul was willing to bear the financial burden of all the wrong Onesimus did to Philemon. So what happens? Philemon agrees. He honors Paul's request through his intercession, just as the Father honors the Son's request through His intercession. Onesimus becomes identified with Paul because he's now saved, *and* we have Paul's willingness repay the loss. Philemon can now receive him as if receiving Paul himself, because he's identified with Paul and Paul's intercession to cover all the wrongs he had done. Philemon not only received Onesimus as if He was receiving Paul, but he also releases him from all condemnation for what he did, and freed him, and made him able to serve the Lord, however Paul saw fit to use him. Through Paul's intercession, we get this beautiful illustration of imputation, the righteousness of Christ imputed to the sinner from the Father that makes that sinner able to serve Christ all because of the work and the glory of the grace of God. And in this story, we have the rightness of Christ on display in Paul by willingly take on all the wrong Onesimus committed so he would no longer be under condemnation, and he'd be able to freely serve the Lord. The only way all of this could even be possible was if the grace of God was alive and at work within all these men.

6. A Light of Grace

- a. Paul said, *10 I beseech thee for my son Onesimus, whom I have begotten in my bonds...* Paul beseeches Philemon here just as Christ beseeches all of us. Paul implores Philemon. He intreats Philemon to respond with his heart to the grace and the love that's being offered to him, just as God implores all of us to respond with our hearts to the grace and the love He offers us in the gift of His Son! You know, you cannot command someone to receive a gift of love. To command someone to receive a gift of love goes against the very nature of love. We can only beg and plead and implore someone to receive a gift of love! We're presented with that gift. We recognize our spiritual ruin. And we simply accept that gift of eternal life, offered to us in love, and then we live a life of gratitude in

service to Him for all the love and grace He freely showered upon us. I'm reminded of something William Kelly wrote. He wrote that, "To command what is right is certainly not wrong in one possessed of due authority. But grace, while it respects law in its own sphere, acts incomparably above law in a sphere of its own, of which Christ is the centre and the fulness, the object, pattern, and motive. The apostle, therefore, whatever the rights of his position and this even 'in Christ,' [he] puts love forward, and thus only beseeches one who like himself realised his [own] incalculable debt to the love of God in Christ our Lord."

- b. We talked yesterday about vs. [11](#): *Which in time past was to thee unprofitable, but now profitable to thee and to me.* I love this line. In the Greek, Onesimus' name meant "profitable." So the servant who is named profitable who wasn't really profitable is now actually profitable to you and me! We have in the middle of this beseeching of Paul to take the wrong done to him and give Onesimus back to him, we have this light-hearted moment, which is amazing, because in the great scheme of things, in the great scheme of all eternity, this is but a small matter, after all, especially for a mature grace believer like Philemon.
- c. He'd say in [12](#) *Whom I have sent again: thou therefore receive him, that is, mine own bowels: 13 Whom I would have retained with me, that in thy stead he might have ministered unto me in the bonds of the gospel: 14 But without thy mind would I do nothing; that thy benefit should not be as it were of necessity, but willingly.* In other words, Paul would never *force* Philemon to accept the wrong done to him. He'd rather give Philemon the choice of willingly accepting it, willingly releasing him from his wrongdoing, and willingly give him back to Paul. By taking this approach, Paul was trusting that the grace of God was at work inside Philemon, that the grace of God was strong enough in him that he'd willingly do everything Paul asked. **Paul was showing a little bit of faith in grace.** When we get saved, God's grace starts operating inside of us. It takes root in us. It builds us up in the faith. It teaches us. And we can reach a point where we can become mature saints in the faith such that we can actually become *strong in the grace that's in Christ Jesus*. And Paul here is trusting that Philemon is strong enough in that grace, that God's grace was actually operating inside of him, just as we should all trust that's God's grace is operating inside of each other. The example of spiritual leadership that we're seeing in Paul here is that we have to trust grace to work... Just as Christ is always confident in the grace of His Father, so too, Paul was confident in the grace of the Father operating inside of Philemon. The Father trusts grace. Christ trusts grace. Paul trusts grace. And we should all trust that God's grace will also do its good work in us, just as Paul was trusting that grace would compel Philemon to do all he's asking of him. **We have to trust grace.** Interestingly, you can tell Paul wanted so badly to see Philemon do what he wanted him to do that he was very tempted to command him, as an apostle, but he doesn't. Why? Because he's trusting grace to work, just as we are trusting that His grace will work in others. Think of all those references to grace

in Paul's letters. We have to trust grace. It's His grace that calls us to stand firmly in His grace! It's His grace that is His gift to us. It's His grace that empowers us. It's His grace that abounds in us. It's His grace that reigns today, that transcends every sin, that rises above and flows out freely beyond every trial of life, and it's His grace that influences us to act in grace just like Christ. Therefore, we must, like Paul, learn to trust in that grace of God to work in others!

- d. **Here's an interesting thought.** I always found this fascinating. There is one word Paul never mentions in this letter – forgive. He never once says to forgive. Why is that? Why wouldn't you talk about forgiveness in a situation like this? I would argue that this was a show of respect on Paul's part in terms of Philemon's spiritual maturity. Forgiveness isn't something that needs to be addressed in a conversation between mature grace believers, because the question for a mature grace believer isn't about forgiveness. That's a given! The question for a mature grace believer is this: "how much grace do I show the one who wronged me?" That's the question a mature grace believer should be wrestling with.
- e. Forgiveness is WAY OVER HERE. Paul in his letter is WAY OVER HERE in the realm of grace. How much grace do you show someone who wronged you? We know forgiveness should be automatic. We don't need to be told that. Why? Because God automatically forgave us! **Eph 4:32** *And be ye kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven you.* Not only did the Father automatically forgive us but notice that He forgave us for Christ's sake. The Father forgave you *automatically* for His Son's sake because it was His Son who went through the shame, the agony, the torture of that death on the cross for all yours sins! God forgave you *automatically* for His Son's sake because He will never betray His Son! He will never betray the love His Son showed you on that cross! It's for His Son's sake that He will never betray the perfection of what He accomplished at Calvary! And God will never betray His promises, because God is holy! God is love. God is the God of all grace! He doesn't just love people. He IS love itself! That's who He is - the source and embodiment of ALL love! And He doesn't just show grace to people. He IS grace itself! The God of ALL grace, the source of ALL grace! So forgiveness by the Father was automatic, for His Son's sake, because of who He is. This is why our forgiveness of others should also be automatic, because we also forgive for Christ's sake because of who we are now in Christ, because of what God made us in His Son when we believed, because now we are His image out in the world.
- f. **So when something bad happens, the question for the mature believer** is, "How much grace do you show someone who has wronged you?" Why? 1) We forgive others automatically because God forgave us automatically, *and* 2) we show grace to others because of all the grace God's already shown us! Forgiveness is just an act of mercy. You're only pardoning someone who wronged you, but grace... grace rises far above mercy. Grace showers love and goodness to the one who wronged you. Whereas mercy is not getting the punishment we deserve,

grace takes on our punishment for us and then offers us a free gift! Thus, when we hear the gospel, we are introduced to the fact that God is a God of all grace. And when we get saved, God doesn't simply forgive us. He showers us with His grace! He blesses you with all spiritual blessings in this life, and in the life to come, as co-inheritors with His Son, you'll literally own everything! God the Father has extended as much favor to you as His only begotten Son, because He loves you as much as His Son! He could not do more for you and He would not do less! So we forgive others automatically because God forgave us automatically, *and* we show grace because of all the grace God's already shown us. **Now** we're well past forgiveness OVER HERE. **Now** we're all operating in the realm of His grace OVER HERE. Now we're talking about things like Romans 12 and verses like **Rom 12:14** *Bless them which persecute you: bless, and curse not.* **Rom 12:20** *Therefore if thine enemy hunger, feed him; if he thirst, give him drink: for in so doing thou shalt heap coals of fire on his head.* We render to no man evil for evil. We show grace to our enemies. We let God be the judge of all the wrong that's done. Why? We forgive others automatically because God forgave us automatically, and we show grace to others because of all the grace God's already shown us. This is the reality of God's grace alive in our hearts expressing itself to our enemies through acts of love, just as the reality of God's grace in His heart expressed itself to us in the sacrifice of His Son when we were enemies to Him! How can you not love what Darby said about Philemon? He said Paul's letter to Philemon inspires "the individual Christian to act as the light of grace." In view of this letter, how can we not want to act as a light of grace in this dark world since we're all now recipients of His exceeding abundant grace and love?

g. Forgiveness was never a sufficient solution for a mature grace believer like Philemon, because the question for a mature grace believer is, "how much grace do I show the one who wronged me?" **Only grace will do here and nothing less than grace and all the grace you can possibly give!** And what is the proper amount of grace here? To do all that Paul asked. To view Onesimus as *a brother beloved* and to free him to serve the Lord with Paul. So Philemon actually frees Onesimus. He gives him a proper manumission and let's Onesimus go back to Paul. I've sometimes thought about Onesimus and his journey back to Paul. I wonder what he was thinking. Onesimus could've run away again – this time as a legitimately free man. He was now free. He could've taken off again and done whatever he wanted. But he didn't. He went straight back to Paul to serve the Lord. Why? **Because Onesimus wasn't free when he ran away. Onesimus was free when he found Christ!** He had now become a *true* bondservant. Now he is one whose debt was *truly* paid by another. Now he has been *truly* set free and now... he willingly chooses to serve his *true* master in Heaven!

7. Conclusion

- a. I have a question about vs. 14 Paul writes, *But without thy mind would I do nothing; that thy benefit should not be as it were of necessity, but willingly.* What

was the benefit? What was *thy benefit* exactly? A benefit is just an act of kindness. So Paul is saying that he didn't want to force Philemon to act in kindness but wanted Philemon to *willingly* act in kindness to him, all the while trusting he would do that because he was trusting that God's grace was at work inside of him. Yet, I cannot help but ask the question: who truly benefited more here? Paul in being given Onesimus to help him in the ministry or Philemon for acting in grace and living a life of grace? I'd argue Philemon benefited far more. Acts of grace, living a life of grace, being a light of grace in a dark world, benefits you in every conceivable way, spiritually, emotionally, intellectually, and even physically, but not least of all – it benefits you *eternally* in the heavens.