

Disruptive Community

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Preacher: Neil MacMillan

[0 : 00] Philemon 1 verses 8 to 20. I am sending him, who is my very heart, back to you.

I would have liked to have kept him with me, so that he could take your place in helping me while I am in chains with the gospel. But I did not want to do anything without your consent, so that any favour you do would not seem forth, but would be voluntary.

Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back forever. 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.

So, if you consider me a partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. If he has done you any wrong or owes you anything, charge it to me. I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand.

I will pay it back, not to mention that you owe me your very self. I do wish, brother, that I may have some benefit from you in the Lord. Refresh my heart in Christ. To think about this letter that Miriam read to us, a letter that was written by the Apostle Paul to an individual, a man called Philemon.

[1 : 43] So, it's Paul writing to a friend about a runaway slave, a guy called Onesimus. He is Philemon's slave.

They live in Colossae in modern-day Turkey. And Onesimus has run away, having robbed Philemon. He's gone on a runner, ended up in Rome, where a lot of fugitive slaves went, and somehow has connected with Paul and become a Christian.

And now Onesimus has been sent back from Paul to his owner, Philemon. And the letter is about sort of just preparing the ground for that reunion of runaway slave with slave owner.

And it's a really surprising letter in some ways, because, you know, if I wrote a letter to somebody who owned a slave, I think I'd be saying a few fairly clear truths in a very direct way, saying, you know, this is ridiculous, this is wrong.

It'd be much more confrontational. This is a very subtle, friendly, loving letter. But one of the incredible things that happens is that this loving, friendly, gentle letter, dealing with a very difficult issue, helps to pave the way to destroy one of the great evils of the ancient world.

[3 : 10] This letter, with its loving tone, undermined the whole institution of slavery. It set the Christian church in a different direction, and that Christian influence changed the way the world saw humanity and slavery.

Now, that matters to me today, because as a Christian, I believe that we want to make Jesus famous in our city, and we want to have a very positive impact on issues of justice and how people live together.

We want our church to serve the community well and to care well for those who are in trouble, people like Onesimus. The church is not an island.

The church is connected in to the local area, and so we have to think about our presence in Morningside and Brunsfield, our preaching, how should that impact on the local community?

Now, slavery might seem to you like a really kind of long-ago, faraway issue. So let me read just a little bit to you.

[4 : 22] This is what our theme is today, how to be treasured in our neighbourhood. And we're going to Philemon about how we treat people who are vulnerable and in terrible trouble.

And Paul, this idea, if you would consider me a partner, welcome Onesimus as you would welcome me. That is a revolutionary thought.

Welcome a slave the way you would welcome the apostle. So is slavery still an issue today? Here's a story from the UK in the 21st century in a place called Leighton Buzzard.

A detective chief inspector, Sean O'Neill, said, we've rescued 24 men from slavery. We believe that some of them had been living and working in a state of virtual slavery for up to 15 years.

The men appear to have been recruited from soup kitchens, the inspector says, The chief inspector said they're recruited and told, if you come here and stay with us, we'll pay you £80 a day.

[5 : 31] We'll look after you and give you board and lodgings. But when they get here, their hair is cut off them. They're kept in horse boxes, dog kennels and old caravans.

They're made to work for no money and given very, very small amounts of food. That's the worst case. Some are treated a little better, but they were told they could not leave.

And if they did, they would be beaten up and attacked. That is 21st century Britain, where it's reckoned that 10,000 people live in slavery like that in the UK today.

Some of them working in the drug trade, growing cannabis, some of them working in prostitution and in other forms of human slavery. 40 million slaves, at least, and people in forced labour around the world today.

So these are headlines from 21st century Scotland. I was sold as a slave for £3,500 in Scotland. Victim of barbaric human traffickers, reveals our deal.

[6 : 41] That's from the Sunday Post, October 2019. And then this September in Scotland, Police Scotland Operation sees 24 arrests over human trafficking.

So this is a big problem today. And it was a massive problem in Rome. So I don't know if we can quite see that on the screen, so I'll just tilt this round a wee bit.

So back in ancient Rome, one in three people who populated Italy at that time were slaves. Across the Roman Empire, one in five.

The Roman world was a slave-owning economy. It was the backbone of the culture and of the prosperity of the Roman Empire.

Slavery made many people rich. But for the slaves themselves, of course, life was harsh and uncertain. Slavery was understood by Romans to be an absolute necessity.

[7 : 44] And freedom was not seen as a right, but as a privilege. Slaves themselves had no rights. They had no legal status. They were not allowed to form relationships of their own or families of their own.

And they had no status before the law. So slavery was a massive issue in the Roman world. And Onesimus is one of those slaves.

As I've said, Paul doesn't lay into Philemon, the slave owner, in a direct way. Instead, he does something more subtle. He models to Philemon the love that he wants Philemon to show to Onesimus.

He writes to Philemon with the same love and respect that he wants Philemon to show to his slave. In other words, Paul demonstrates to Philemon the very attitude, the very way of dealing with people that he wants Philemon to show to Onesimus.

[8 : 51] So Paul lives the truth that he tells. That's our Thursday thought, is that we want to live the truth we tell.

So really, Paul writes to say to Philemon, take my brother back. Now, Christians are called by God to be his people, to follow Jesus.

And God will then work through his people, through Jesus' followers like us, if you're a Christian, to bring reconciliation and restoration in the world.

God wants us to work for what is good and to try to fix what is wrong. We want to heal broken relationships. We want to treat all people with justice.

Paul writes to Philemon then and says, take my brother back and treat him well. Because there's two things that Paul needs to do here. First of all, he needs to protect Onesimus.

[9 : 53] And secondly, he needs to win over Philemon, who has been legally wronged. So he needs, Paul needs to protect Onesimus. Think about what it was like to be a runaway slave in the Roman Empire.

Especially a runaway slave who, as verse 18 seems to indicate, has robbed his master. In verse 18, Paul says, if he has done you any wrong or owes you anything, charge it to me.

So people, if you've got your Bible there or your app on your phone, whatever it is, just read verse 18. And there's this indication that Onesimus has robbed Philemon.

That's how most people read that. So he's a thief and he's a runaway in Rome. Slave hunters, bounty hunters prowl the streets of Rome with warrants and descriptions of runaway slaves to bring them back home.

If a runaway slave was captured, he would have his head branded on the forehead, F-U-G, thug, for fugitive. Onesimus, as a runaway slave, he probably ended up with that same branding across his forehead.

[11 : 13] While he's in Rome, he's spending time with Paul now. We don't know how him and Paul hooked up, but they have. Paul is a prisoner and Onesimus is helping him out in practical ways.

Maybe working and providing some money, doing other practical things to help Paul. But let's not be in any mistake. Onesimus' life is in danger. He's a thief.

He's a runaway slave. The treatment of runaway slaves in the Roman world was brutal. Fear of slave ravings, the economic necessity of slavery, meant that slaves who rebelled were treated in a very vicious way.

Savage vengeance was often extracted. There was a Roman senator in AD 61 who was killed by one of his slaves. The senator's name was Lucius Padanius Secundus.

And he had 400 slaves, and one of those slaves stabbed him to death. The slave was arrested. And at his trial, the prosecution argued that all 400 of Lucius' slaves should be put to death.

[12 : 23] One slave committed the crime, but it ended up that 400 slaves were executed. Slaves, their life was always in the balance.

So Paul knows that Onesimus is in danger here of whipping, of beating, or even of death. So he needs to protect Onesimus. He needs to win Philemon.

So he writes this very warm, loving letter. It's very gentle to his friend. It's not a manifesto for political change, as we would have read it.

But more good comes of this letter than Paul could ever have imagined. Paul doesn't write saying, set him free. But he does say, as we said in verse 17, receive him as you would receive me.

That's a really powerful statement to make about a slave who had no legal rights, who was barely a human individual. Paul says, treat him the way you would treat me.

[13 : 25] He says to Philemon, take him back, not as a slave, in verse 16, but as a brother in the Lord.

So that's how Paul upends this institution, this idea of slavery, is by saying, think differently about this man.

Think of him not as a slave, but as a brother. Receive him not as a runaway slave, but as an apostle of Jesus Christ, as you would receive me.

I've been reading this book recently called *Confronting Questions* by Rebecca McLaughlin. Twelve difficult questions facing Christianity in the 21st century.

And one of the questions she asks is, doesn't the Bible condone slavery? And here's one of the things she says. It's really interesting. She says this, by humanizing, equalizing, and embracing slaves as brothers and sisters, the New Testament created a tectonic tension that would ultimately erupt in the abolition of slavery.

[14 : 39] So with the New Testament, with the growth of Christianity, comes this monumental shift. Why do we see human slavery as abhorrent today when it was so acceptable in the Roman world?

Because of the intrusion, the growth, the spread of Christianity and Christian values into our world. Slavery went from being seen as part of the natural order to being a hideous act of wickedness.

Thank you, Lord Jesus, for that insight into what it is to be human. To be in the side of Jesus is to be in the side of justice, fairness, and goodness.

We follow Jesus for a better future for ourselves and the world we live in. Take back my brother, Paul says. Simple words, but totally revolutionary.

Secondly, what do we see as Paul writes this letter? Well, what we see is this, that he says, you know, we do have to live the truth we tell. That's the Thursday thought.

[15 : 44] Paul wants Philemon to act in a certain way. So Paul shows him that same kind of love in action in the way that he writes this letter.

The letter's got a very clear, simple structure. We're going to look at a bit more of the letter next week with Laird. But it's got a clear, simple structure. You know, there's a greeting at the start of the letter. Most of the New Testament letters are typical of their time.

They begin with a greeting to whoever's been written to, some salutations. Then Paul relates a little bit to Philemon, catches up with him, and then he's got this petition.

Please receive Onesimus back before he says goodbye. Now, we started our reading at verse 8 where it says, Therefore, therefore, although in Christ I could be bold and order you to do what you

ought to do, I appeal to you on the basis of love.

I could order you what to do, but I appeal to you on the basis of love. Now, verse 8 starts with therefore, which means we have to look back the way.

[16:46] If you ever come to a bit in the New Testament or in the Bible, it says therefore, it's saying that what is to come, the verses coming, are built on what's just been said.

And that's what he does. It refers back to verses 4 to 7. We didn't read them, but if you can see them in your Bible or in your phone or laptop. So, 47, basically, is Paul building bridges with Philemon, connecting with Philemon.

And basically what he says is this. He says, Philemon, you are some guy. I know that. Philemon, I love who you are. You are kind and you're generous. Your faith makes a massive impact on your life and on everybody who comes into contact with you.

You're a big-hearted, open-handed, generous man. So, Paul builds this bridge with Philemon by recognizing just what a lovely person Philemon is in so many ways.

Paul is living the truth he tells because Christians proclaim a gospel of reconciliation.

Reconciliation, first of all, with God and then with others. So, we build bridges with people.

[18:01] That's one of the truths that we tell. Well, it's one of the truths that we live. We build bridges. Secondly, we don't manipulate through power.

So, Paul doesn't make a power play. Don't misuse power if you're a Christian. See, Paul's very clear. I'm not going to insist on my rights here. I'm an apostle.

I could tell you exactly what to do. I could order you to take Onesimus back into your house and treat him well. But I'm not going to do that. I'm going to appeal to you on the basis of love.

So, Paul reorders the power dynamic here, doesn't he? He relates to Philemon the way that he wants Philemon to relate to Onesimus.

Not by insisting on rights, but by emphasizing love. Paul had the right to order Philemon, but instead he treats Philemon with love.

[18:56] Philemon had the right to punish Onesimus, but instead, Paul says, treat him with love. Paul embodies the ethic that he's advocating for.

Christianity is not about power and manipulation. It's the message of God's humiliation, love, and sacrifice. That's the truth we live and tell.

Paul exudes love. We have a message of love as Christians. That means our lives should exude love to the people around us. If we want to be treasured in Morningside and Bruntsfield and Gilmerton or wherever we live, let's build bridges with people.

Don't misuse whatever power we have unless it exude love and kindness. Now, verse 10. Paul says, I appealed you for my son Onesimus.

So the whole letter is about Onesimus, but Onesimus isn't mentioned until verse 10. And then Paul says, I appealed you for Onesimus. Formerly he was useless to you, but now he's become useful both to you and to me.

[20:12] Now, Paul is writing there with a wee chuckle, a smirk, because there's a neat little pun going on. In Greek, it might say this in your footnote, Onesimus.

So the slave's name is Onesimus. On Onesimus means useful. And Paul says, well, I'm appealing to you about useful, my son useful or Onesimus, because actually I know that in the past he was useless, but now he's become useful to you and me.

So mystery useful was, I admit, totally useless before, but now he's useful to me and to you. How does Paul see Onesimus? Well, verse 12, I'm sending him back.

He's my very heart. He doesn't see him as a slave, as a piece of property, as some subhuman. He is my very heart.

He's part of the Philemon. He's my very heart. Verse 10, he says, he's become a son to me. This guy Onesimus, he is family.

[21:21] I'm sending back my heart to you. So Paul exudes warmth and love. And we must breathe love in our dealings with the people that we meet, in the shops, the schools, the cafes, the traffic jams, the streets of Morningside and Bruntsfield and Edinburgh.

We are a loving and kind people we see. So even when we have hard dealings over hard issues, we still breathe love. And then Paul alters perceptions, giving people new way of seeing and relating.

In verse 16, he says that Onesimus is no longer a slave. He's better than a slave. He's a dear brother.

So he's altering the perception of Onesimus from slave to dear brother. And that word brother is the same word that he has used earlier in the chapter in verse 7 and we'll use again in verse 20 for Philemon.

So he puts Philemon, brother, Onesimus, brother. He puts them both in the same bracket. You guys are the same. You're both brothers. He's reordering how people see themselves and those around them.

[22 : 40] He tells Philemon right at the beginning of the letter, he says, Philemon, you are a dear friend and you're beloved is the word that he kind of uses.

And then in verse 16, what does he say? He says about Philemon, he's a dear brother. He's beloved. So Onesimus in verse 16 is beloved.

Philemon verse 1, beloved. So they've been bracketed together as beloved as brothers. New ways of seeing people.

New ways of treating people. New ways of relating to one another. Paul is saying, I have found a new brother. And we find new brothers and sisters in the life of the church.

We're a community of love and care and unity who treat each other like family. That's what Paul is saying. The normal rules don't apply anymore. In the church, there is neither slave nor free.

[23 : 47] And so in the church, we find new brothers and sisters and we make that real. We see people differently. So we live the truth we tell.

The way that we treat others is utterly changed. And I just want to say this. Let my people go. So let my people go. Whenever you read a book in the Bible, whether it's a long book like the book of John or the book of Exodus or this, which is one of the shortest little bits of the Bible, isn't it? The book of Philemon. You'll ask, why is this in the Bible? Why is this included in the Bible? That's always a great question to ask. And here we're showing that God's people are a community who turn the world upside down through the way that they love each other and love those who are least and lowest and last.

How we love the vulnerable, the weak, is one of the great hallmarks of what it is to be a Christian. God is a God who, from all eternity, has stood up for the slave and said, let my people go. So I want to say this. Let's read this little short letter with a humble heart.

[25 : 07] Philemon needed to learn to forgive Onesimus. Onesimus had wronged him. Who do you need to forgive? Who do you need to forgive?

Who's let you down so badly that you struggle to forgive? Even if you can't find a way for relational reconciliation, maybe you need to go to God and forgive this person so that you can move ahead. Who do you need to forgive? Here's another question. Where am I in sin? Paul refuses to use power and authority to manipulate to get the end he wants.

Where do I use my power or my authority to manipulate others to get what I want? Where are the places where I am treating other people as a means to an end?

Because that's not how we do it. We love freely and gently. Here's another question. How can I show love? Where can I bring reconciliation between others whose relationship is in trouble?

[26 : 18] How can you help build bridges? So we read with a humble heart. What is this saying to us about where our lives have gone wrong or where we need to help out?

Read with a humble heart and live with a compassionate heart, please. Because I think as I read this letter, I am struck by Paul's compassion for Philemon and Onesimus.

He cares deeply about Philemon and he cares so deeply for the slave Onesimus. And I think there was a time in Paul's pre-Christian past when he would not have given the time of day to a runaway slave.

When he wouldn't have cared less whether Onesimus lived or died. Where does that difference come from? Where does the heart of compassion that Paul has and that I need, where does that come from?

I want to say it comes from God. It comes from God. In verse 12, he says, he's my very heart.

[27 : 28] In verse 20, he says to Philemon, refresh my heart. Both times, it doesn't use the normal Greek word for heart, *cardia*, but a word that means bowels. Okay, bowels or guts.

He says Onesimus is my very bowel, which in English doesn't make much sense. But in Greek just meant, you know, he's just like, man, I just feel so deeply for this guy. You know, my whole being

embraces him.

I love him. And when I was reading that, I was really struck to think about, you know, the bowels, the seat of affection and emotion, the seat of tenderness and compassion in Paul's thinking. And I thought, where does that come from? That comes from Jesus. Because the same language is used of Jesus in the Gospels. When Jesus looks over Jerusalem, he's moved. His guts are churned up with compassion and pity. In verse 36 of Matthew chapter 9, when Jesus sees the cross, he has compassion. His bowels are moved.

[28 : 35] Isn't that bizarre for us to see? But, you know, his guts are churned up because the people he saw, when he saw the cross, they were harassed and helpless like sheep without a shepherd. Or Matthew 14, 14.

When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them and healed their sick. Paul's great heart of compassion was molded in him by his own experience of the great compassion of God for him, a lost, ruined, and very broken man.

Are you a compassionate human being? Who do you have the power to help or to harm? Who are the vulnerable, the weak, the broken and the powerless people that you are in contact with regularly or pass on the streets of Morningside and Brunnsfield?

Be compassionate. Be compassionate. Because as we see his compassion, as we receive his compassion, it fills us with compassion for others.

One of the really fascinating things about this book, the chapter on Slavery in it, is she's got a little bit of what she calls, which Rebecca McLaughlin calls, the miracle of the black church.

[29 : 51] And it's about the deep and absolutely remarkable movement of God in the black American slave population.

And she asks this question, why did black slaves in America embrace the religion of the oppressors? And she says, it's because they saw the heart of God.

Here's a quote. The Jesus of Scripture, who cared for the oppressed and marginalized, embraced a slave role, spoke truth to power and suffered torture, rejection, and death.

And that appealed to slaves. Do we see this true Jesus?

That the slaves saw? And does the heart of Jesus win your heart and mind today? Are you compelled by what you see of the goodness of Jesus?

[31 : 27] Because there is no better life than life with Jesus. We need to see the truth of what Jesus stands for and the beauty of his compassion. He accepts us as broken people.

He does not treat us as our sins discern. So we follow Jesus. Anna Lorne, who's going to pray for us in a minute, sent me a copy of her prayer earlier in the week. And she says this towards the end of the prayer.

Jesus became a slave to set us free. He was willing to set aside power, status, privilege, and put himself in the lowest position in society. He became vulnerable.

He became a refugee. He became an outcast. He was oppressed by us and for us. And he is rich in mercy. He loved us. When we were running headlong away from him, he shows us grace and gives us new life.

Hallelujah. That's where we want to start today. This new relationship with Jesus and all his truth and justice and compassion.

[32 : 30] We want to be changed by this Jesus so that we will live with truth and compassion in our communities for the weak and the vulnerable people around us.

So please receive Jesus, love Jesus, worship Jesus, serve Jesus. Short prayer from me. And then we're going to sing a great psalm about this very issue of injustice and depression, Psalm 72.

Lord, hear our prayers today and answer them, we ask, that we would be people who stand against slavery in this world. And that we would be people who stand for justice and goodness.

We know that the Bible depicts us as slaves, as slaves to sin. And that Jesus came and took that slavery so that we could be set free.

And so may we know the freedom of Jesus today, the compassion of Jesus and the life of Jesus. Amen.