

November 24, 2024

Small Letter, Big Teaching
I. How the Gospel Changes the World¹
Philemon 1-25

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Paul's letter to Philemon is not read much these days. In part, I suppose, because it is so brief, and therefore often overlooked – many Christians probably don't even realize it is in the Bible. But, in addition, some Biblical scholars ignore the letter to Philemon because Philemon is perceived as being soft on slavery. And, therefore, inappropriate reading for our “morally enlightened” times. I think such scholars are wrong on at least two counts. First, it seems to me that it is always unfair to judge the worldviews of ancient authors by modern values.

And second, and more to the point, in his letter to Philemon, Paul is not soft on slavery. In fact, Paul forcefully undercuts the whole foundation of that evil institution. The scholars are right in that Paul doesn't do so by frontal assault. Nowhere does Paul say outright that slavery is wrong. Instead, what Paul does is far more subtle – but also far more radical. The foundation of slavery is the wrongful belief that people can be treated as property. Paul shows us how the grace of Jesus Christ completely explodes that foundation by his simple request that Philemon see in his wayward slave, Onesimus, not a piece of property to be managed, but a brother in Christ to be embraced. In so doing, Paul not only destroys the legitimacy of slavery as a social institution, he also – and far more importantly – sets loose a radical revolution in all of the relationships that govern life. It is the quiet revolution of the Kingdom of God:

*For in Christ Jesus you are all children of God,
through faith. For as many of you as were baptized into
Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek,
there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor
female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.²*

And that, I think, is why it is important for us to read Paul's letter to Philemon. Not just because of its undermining of slavery – but also because it is a model of how God is bending both our lives and the life of this world toward His Kingdom. It is a model of how the Gospel changes the world: not by an overwhelming frontal assault; but by quietly changing minds and hearts – one person at a time. God could have just come down and said, “*No more slavery.*” Then everyone would be free, but indifferent or even still hateful toward one another. So instead God said, “*You are all brothers and sisters in Christ,*” and left it for us to work out the details of how that would change our daily

living. It is taking a long time, and is extremely messy – but in the end, by God’s quiet revolution, we will all not just be free, we will all be family, God’s family.

This is how God, this is how the Gospel, changes the world: not by frontal assault, but quietly, one person at a time. We are fascinated with the big picture; God is fascinated with the details. We love the corporate; God loves the personal. We want immediate results, even if some get lost in the shuffle; God is patient and will wait for everyone to climb aboard. Like a seed growing slowly and then bursting forth a hundredfold.³ Like a shepherd leaving ninety-nine in the fold to search all night for the one missing.⁴ Like a brief letter to a man named Philemon concerning a runaway slave named Onesimus. The Gospel changes the world quietly, one person, one conversion, at a time. And so His Kingdom comes.

What does all of this have to do with you and me this morning? Well, that the Gospel changes the world one person at a time means that you and I have unique and individual value before God – that every human being has unique and individual value before God. That God addresses us not as “occupant,” but calls each one of us by our own name. And, even more, it means that a single person – even you or me – can make a meaningful difference in God’s economy of salvation.

You are probably familiar with the “butterfly effect” – the idea that everything in this world is so interconnected that a butterfly flapping its wings in the Amazon can set off a tornado in Texas. The story behind the discovery of the butterfly effect is rather fascinating. In the 1960’s, an M.I.T. research meteorologist and mathematician named Edward Lorenz was trying to come up with a computer model for predicting weather patterns. Eventually he came up with twelve mathematical equations to govern his computer universe. To make a long, but fascinating, story short, one day he was working with his computer weather model and he took a shortcut to speed things up. He shortened a critical number in his data input from .506127 to simply .506. He assumed that .000127 was too small a number to be consequential. It turned out he was completely wrong. That tiny little fraction – as far as his weather model was concerned, a puff of wind no bigger than a baby’s sneeze – turned out to be the difference between a blue sky and a monsoon.⁵ And so the butterfly effect: the theory which holds that because of the connectedness of all things, even the smallest influences can lead to vastly different outcomes.

Applying all this to you and me, and to the way the Gospel changes the world, one theologian writes:

. . . the apparent truth is that we belong to a web of creation in which nothing, absolutely nothing, is inconsequential . . .

Every one of us will change the world . . . All it takes is .000127. Shift anything in the world that much and you may be the catalyst that turns a monsoon into a blue sky (or the other way around). Pick up some stranger’s

*crying baby at exactly the right moment and that baby may turn out to be an artist instead of a tyrant . . . You just never know.*⁶

Because the Gospel changes the world one person at a time, you and I can be significant partners in God's work of salvation. A kind word here, a helping hand there; a momentary turning away from temptation, a prayer heartfully prayed, all of these may be precisely the .000127 which, in God's hands, can transform the world for the better. In the massive economies of this modern world, you and I are but specks on the bottom line. But in God's economy of the coming Kingdom, our small daily acts of faithfulness, obedience, compassion, and love, matter greatly. In fact, they can matter more than all the captains of industry, generals, and presidents put together. Just ask Jesus, and James and John and Peter and Paul, and Philemon.

And, therefore, through this small little letter, God is inviting us to do our part in changing the world through His Gospel, one person at a time. But this letter to Philemon is also challenging us to do this in a very particular way. At the beginning we said that some in our day avoid this letter because of what it doesn't say about slavery. I think if we truly hear what Paul is asking of Philemon, perhaps the real scandal of this letter to our modern world is what it does say about slavery. Or not just about slavery, but what it says to us about each and every form of human relationship. For what Paul asks of Philemon is not just that he take back his runaway slave Onesimus without punishment. That request would have been scandalous enough. But the real request, the truly scandalous thing, the truly "how the Gospel changes the world" request is this: Paul asks Philemon to take Onesimus back no longer as his slave – but now as his beloved brother in Christ.

In other words, Paul's letter to Philemon is not only inviting us to do our part in changing the world with God one person at a time – it is also asking us, first and foremost demanding of us, that our participation in the Gospel's world-changing work begins when we allow the Gospel to change how we view others, one person at a time. No longer to see others through the categories the world teaches us to use – to see others in terms of race or class or ethnicity or political party or even college football fandom. But to see others, to see everyone we encounter, through the eyes of God. Through the lens of how the Gospel is changing this world one person at a time. To see others, first and foremost, as our brothers and sisters in the new family God is creating.

"No longer as a slave, but more than a slave, as a beloved brother," Paul writes to Philemon. A church in England was having a combined communion service with one of its mission churches. During the service, the pastor noticed that a former burglar was kneeling at the communion rail beside a judge of the Supreme Court of England – the very judge who, years before, had sentenced that burglar to seven years in prison. After his release, the burglar had been converted to Christ through that mission church, and had even become a Christian worker.

After the service, the pastor and the judge walked out together, and the judge said to the pastor, “*Did you see who was kneeling beside me at the communion rail?*” “*Yes,*” replied the pastor, “*but I didn’t know that you noticed.*” They walked on in silence for a moment, and then the judge said, “*What a miracle of grace!*” The pastor nodded in agreement, “*Yes, what a marvelous miracle of grace!*” But then the judge said, “*But to whom do you refer?*” And the pastor replied, “*Why to the conversion of that convict.*” The judge said, “*But I was not referring to him. I was thinking of myself.*”

“What do you mean?” the pastor asked. The judge replied, “That burglar knew how much he needed Christ to save him from his sins. But look at me. I was taught from childhood to live as a gentleman, to keep my word, to say my prayers, to go to church. I went through Oxford, took my degrees, was called to the bar and eventually became a judge. Pastor, nothing but the grace of God could have caused me to admit that I was a sinner on a level with that burglar. It took much more grace to forgive me for all my pride and self-righteousness, to get me to admit that I was no better in the eyes of God than that convict whom I had sent to prison.”⁷

“*No longer as a slave, but more than a slave, as a beloved brother.*” To learn, by God’s grace, to see ourselves first, and then others second, for what we all really are – equal in the eyes of God, equally loved by God, equally redeemed by God, and so made brothers and sisters to one another and to all in Christ Jesus our Lord. Because the Gospel changes the world one person at a time, we are asked to do just what Paul asks Philemon to do. Philemon is asked to look into the face of Onesimus and see, not a slave, but a brother. Christ calls us to be willing to look into the faces of those before us – and there see, not a racial or socio-economic or political category, but a person, a person whom Jesus loves. To see, one person at a time, that here indeed is our brother, our sister, in Christ.

And then, because the Gospel changes the world one person at a time, we are asked to act upon that recognition. Philemon is asked to forgive and receive Onesimus back into his home. To defy the conventions of the day, to scandalize society, to cross the line and receive Onesimus back not as a slave, but as an equal in Christ. To treat him, to act towards him, as his brother in Christ. And so we, too, are asked to run the risk of sticking our necks out, being different, defying convention, and getting involved – daily practicing our own form of holy and loving inclusion for the sake of the Kingdom of God, one person at a time.

Peter Marty, a Lutheran pastor, tells of a five-year-old girl in his congregation named Lucy Carlson who is seeking to do just that – starting with her own neighborhood. Marty writes that in Lucy’s family, honest conversation about current events is a regular occurrence. So when national anger and division broke out following the death of George Floyd, Lucy went to her mom and said, “*I think it’s important to know our*

neighbors. I'm going to meet them all. If they need help, I want them to know where I live so they can come to me for help. I'm going to have them sign my paper so I know their name. But not in cursive."

The next day, carrying an enormous piece of paper and a pouch of Crayola markers, Lucy and her mom headed to the first house. The family was cleaning out the garage when Lucy stepped up confidently. "Hi. I'm Lucy, and this is my mom, Erin. We live across the street, and I think it's important to know you neighbors. So, I want you to sign my paper. You can come to my house if you need help, and I'll help you."

Smiling, each family member wrote their name with a marker. Nobody at the second house answered the door, so Lucy wrote down the address to remember to follow up later. At the third house, the moms got to talking. With some impatience, Lucy pulled her "phone" out of her pocket and started "typing." Before long she said, "Mom, don't you think it's time to get going to the next house?" The neighbor asked what she was typing on. "It's my phone. But it's not a real phone. It's actually a fan remote that doesn't work." The women laughed, and off went Lucy and her mother to the next house.

Lucy spent more summer days going house to house. She'd bring her poster-sized paper and pouch of markers along with her customary spiel. After introducing herself and telling the homeowner where she lived, she'd say, "I think it's important to know your neighbors, so I want you to sign this." As she handed them the paper adorned with rainbows and smiley faces, she made sure to point out her two glitter markers, but would also say, "You can pick whatever color you want."

From her neighborhood journeys, Lucy learned how to make jam. Multiple neighbors offered their teenagers for babysitting. A retired music teacher let her strum the strings of his harp. Lucy showed off her yoga poses. She met a woman from China.

And then, Jacob Blake was shot. Lucy's response: "Mom, I think we need to go meet some more neighbors."⁸

Because this is how the Gospel changes the world.

Paul writes a Christian named Philemon regarding taking back his runaway slave Onesimus – but asking him to receive Onesimus back *"no longer as a slave but more than a slave, as a beloved brother."* And one person at a time, God is inviting us, in His grace, to join Him in the building of His Kingdom family – brothers and sisters made one

in the grace and love of Christ our Savior. If we will accept His invitation, then you and I just may find ourselves – like Paul, like Philemon, like Lucy – erasing the lines; removing the boundaries; meeting and embracing our neighbors, our new brothers and sisters in Christ. And, in turn, finding our own lives being lifted up, broadened, and increased in both grace and love. For this is how the Gospel changes the world, by teaching us to see others as Christ sees us. And this is also how the Gospel changes you and me.

¹ This sermon was inspired by a long-ago reading of James Tunstead Burtchaell’s book, Philemon’s Problem: A Theology of Grace (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998).

² Galatians 3:26-28.

³ Mark 4:1-9, 26-32.

⁴ Luke 15:1-7.

⁵ Barbara Brown Taylor, The Luminous Web (Cambridge: Cowley Publications, 2000), pp. 93-95.

⁶ Taylor, p. 97.

⁷ Steven J. Cole, Lesson 1: The Changes of the Gospel (Philemon 1-25) | Bible.org.

⁸ Peter W. Marty, “Know your neighbor,” Christian Century, Vol. 137, No. 22 (October 21, 2020), p. 3.