

Philemon

Philemon is a unique letter in the midst of Paul's letters. It wasn't sent primarily to a church, but primarily to an individual man. It is often overlooked because it is assumed by pastors, people, and even commentators to be all about the relationship between slaves and slave holders. I don't think that is the case at all however.

1. It is not often that I deviate from the majority, but in this case I have to.
2. Feel free to disagree, but I think there is much more to this letter than the relationship between slaves and masters...I don't even think that is the point.
3. I think this letter reminds us, that as believers, we will be called to Do hard things, regardless of who we are.

Read/Pray

I want us to see 3 main things in this little letter as we keep in mind the theme...do hard things

I. Very Different Men

The letter titled Philemon is filled with a lot more names, than just his.

1. Apphia—likely Philemon's wife
2. Archippus
 - a. Likely Philemon's and Apphia's son
 - b. He is described as a fellow soldier.
 - c. Colossians 4:17 *Say to Archippus, "Take heed to the ministry which you have received in the Lord, that you may fulfill it."*
3. The Church
 - a. The one that meets in the home of Philemon and his family
 - b. This little letter is not just to Philemon. It is to his wife, son, and fellow believers.
4. Epaphras
 - a. Colossians 4:12-13 *Epaphras, who is one of your number, a bonds slave of Jesus Christ, sends you his greetings, always laboring earnestly for you in his prayers, that you may stand perfect and fully assured in all the will of God. For I testify for him that he has a deep concern for you and for those who are in Laodicea and Hierapolis.*
5. Mark (Barnabas' cousin), Aristarchus (Paul's fellow prisoner), Demas who would eventually abandon Paul and the faith, and Luke, the Gentile physician who followed Paul and gave us Luke and Acts

While this little letter does include many names, three stand out as the main characters in the narrative that underlies the letter: Paul, Onesimus, and Philemon.

A. Paul

1. A former terrorist turned believer
2. Now a Prisoner v1 and an old man v9

B. Onesimus

1. A slave of Philemon
 - a. A runaway slave v11
 - b. A runaway slave who was also a thief v18
2. Paul's child...his very heart v10, v12

C. Philemon

1. Fellow worker v1b
2. Loved Christ, loved the brethren, and had a solid faith v4-6
3. He was refreshing to the people of God. v7
4. I know that it is often the assumption that he was a slave owner...but just hold that for now if you will.

These 3 main characters are clearly very different.

1. We have a former terrorist who is now an apostle
2. We have a runaway slave who is now born again, a new creation by God's grace.
3. We have a man who is a fellow worker in the kingdom of God, who had been wronged by his one and only slave that we know of.
4. Christianity is made up of all different types of people, from all different backgrounds, and yet all are on equal footing in Christ
5. Galatians 3:28 *There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.*
6. Isn't this good news...you can be taken from wherever you are and have been to being "one in Christ Jesus."

II. Very Difficult Situations

All three of these men show us that the Christian life is characterized by doing hard things. Think about it.

A. Paul

1. He is in prison...he had every reason to complain!
2. It would be so hard to be a kingdom citizen behind bars.
3. Yet, what does he do? While sitting in a jail cell, on top of writing multiple letters, he
 - a. Evangelizes Onesimus
 - b. Disciples Onesimus
 1. He was with him enough that he could testify that he was useful v11
 2. He spent enough time teaching him that he was willing to do what Paul instructed him to do. v12
 - c. Writes a letter to Philemon v19a
 - d. Made sacrifices for him v18-19

B. Onesimus

1. Went back to Philemon after running away
 - a. One source said the abbreviation for fugitive would often be branded into the forehead of a runaway slave.
 - b. Another source said that his bones or joints would be broken

2. Went back to Philemon after stealing from him
 - a. On top of him running away, he apparently also took some valuables or money from Philemon.
 - b. Onesimus would not have skipped up to the door saying “honey I’m home.”
 - c. But he doesn’t justify his new found “freedom.” He does the hard thing and returns to Philemon at Paul’s instruction.
3. This would be a very hard thing to do...but it was the right thing to do.

C. Philemon

1. Receive Onesimus v17
 - a. Free Onesimus v16
 - b. The possible scenario of Onesimus being his brother and why Philemon might not have been the slaveholder we all assume he was. v16
2. Forgive Onesimus v18-20

Living the Christian life will put us in some very difficult situations.

1. Now, studying the Christian life doesn’t pose too many threats. Talking. Doing some good.
2. But living the life will bring difficulties...things that are not easy to do.
3. The Lord will not put more on you than you can handle
 - a. No! That is not what it says.
 - b. 1 Corinthians 10:13 *No temptation has overtaken you but such as is common to man; and God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will provide the way of escape also, so that you will be able to endure it.*
 - c. This is about temptation...not life.
 - d. God gladly allows life to be too difficult so that we have to lean on him
 1. Like Paul in prison yet still investing 100% in the kingdom...hard
 2. Like Onesimus in humble repentance...hard
 3. Like Philemon in gracious forgiveness...hard
4. In the Christian life, we must do hard things...you can’t wait on the stars to align or for you to feel like it. You just have to do!

III. Very Determined Obedience

A. Paul

1. Surely he didn’t feel like writing the letter he wrote...circumstances were not conducive to creative writing
2. Surely he didn’t feel like evangelizing or discipling
3. Surely he didn’t feel like bending over backwards for a runaway slave...he was the one who should have people bending over backwards for him!
4. But, in spite of his feelings, he determined to do the right thing...the hard things

B. Philemon

1. You know Onesimus got himself into this mess.
2. Onesimus broke his word to me and took off!
3. The last thing he deserves is forgiveness, freedom, and a fresh start!
4. But, in spite of his feelings, he determined to do the right thing...the hard things v21-22

C. Onesimus

1. It doesn't make good sense to go back to Philemon
2. I could be branded, broken, beaten, even killed...aren't I worth more to the kingdom alive?
3. But, in spite of his feelings, he determined to do the right thing...the hard things
4. We know of a letter from Iraneaus to the church at Ephesus, and their bishop Onesimus, who many believe to be the Onesimus of Philemon

There was a determined obedience in each of these men.

1. In a sense they have to take a deep breath, separate themselves from their feelings, look at the Word of God and do the right things...do hard things.
2. Christianity is not about the way you feel or the way you talk...or even about the things you do. It is about being...it is about living...by faith.
3. Faith is the assurance of things hoped for...the evidence of things...NOT SEEN (or felt)
4. What is the right thing to do...do it even when it doesn't make sense to anyone else...even when it is hard...because it is right.

Determine to obey...to do the hard things.

1. **We often let our feelings dictate our actions...and then justify our actions by transforming our theology.**
2. **We must let our theology dictate our actions...and then let our actions transform our feelings.**
3. Proverbs 28:26 *He who trusts in his own heart is a fool, But he who walks wisely will be delivered.*

Conclusion:

1. For some of you repenting is hard...admitting you have been playing
2. For some of you believing is hard...accepting the love and forgiveness of God
3. For some of you taking that step that God has been speaking to you about is hard.
 - a. Life is short.
 - b. Take a risk
 - c. Trust Him to catch You if You miss the landing strip.

Do the hard things...they will produce more holiness in a minute than our "going through the motions" will in a number of years.

Discussion Questions for Home Groups

1. What can we learn about God from this text?
 2. What can we learn about man?
 3. What can we learn about Christ?
 4. What was the most impactful part of the sermon in your opinion?
 5. In what ways can you apply what you learned to your life? In response to this message, I will _____
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