

## THE COST OF FOLLOWING CHRIST

Philemon

*(A sermon on Philemon)*

I think it was the French philosopher, Voltaire, who said, “In the beginning God created man in his own image, and we have been trying to return the favor ever since.” We certainly have a tendency to fashion God into whatever image most pleases us. And I think we can have the same tendency when it comes to thinking about what it looks like to follow Christ. Of course, we see this in politics. Many politicians come around, eagerly telling Christians that Jesus would certainly be okay supporting or doing things that we know the Bible condemns. But it’s not just politicians who are prone to this, is it? Many members of Christian churches have tended to do the same thing over the years. It’s why when discipline, for example, is restored to a local church, some members will leave saying, “This is going too far,” when you and I know that the Bible explicitly commands such things. Again, in short, we tend to fashion in our own minds what Jesus demands and doesn’t demand of us instead of allowing the Bible to shape that. And I think that one book that can help conform our hearts to the Scripture in terms of what it looks like—and costs—to follow Jesus is the book of Philemon.

Now, of course, you anticipated that since I’ve already made clear that we’re looking at the book of Philemon this morning. But my guess is that if the sermon text were a mystery up to the point of me saying that, you would have never anticipated the punchline being, “Philemon is a really good book for helping to show us what following Jesus looks like.” And yet it is.

It’s a small book, the smallest of Paul’s letters—only twenty-five verses long. And it’s written to an individual whom we do not know outside of this letter. And finally, the story behind the letter concerns a runaway slave. Again, with all of these factors, it feels like the least likely of books to help show us what it looks like to follow Christ. But when we dive into the details of this letter, I think we’ll find it immensely challenging to us and helpful for us. So, let’s start by trying to see what actually happened to bring about this letter and what is being said in it.

I think that just by reading the letter, we can reconstruct the scene and events that precipitated this letter from Paul to Philemon fairly accurately. Let me see if I can show you how we can put it together. First, we can see that Philemon was a respected believer who hosted the church in his home (vv. 1-2). Moreover, we can pretty strongly say that he was in the city of Colossae. The reason we can say that is because many of the individuals whom Paul addresses in this letter to Philemon, he also mentions in the letter to the Colossians—including Onesimus, whom Paul calls “one of you” when he writes to the Colossians. And when I say that Philemon is a respected believer at the church there, I mean that the respect he would have had was deserved. It’s not just that he allowed the church to gather in his home, but Paul mentions the love and faith that he has and how he’s refreshed the hearts of the saints there (vv. 5, 7). And that will be important for us to remember as we go through this letter because makes a strong, sacrificial request of him. Philemon is a good brother who has faithfully shown his love for the Lord and the church.

And there's one more detail about Philemon we can note. It seems that he's a man of wealth. We can conclude that not simply because he has a house large enough to host the church in Colossae but also because he has slaves. Or at least we know that he had one slave—Onesimus. Paul will mention in v. 16 that Onesimus is Philemon's "bondservant," which is simply a way of saying that Onesimus is his slave.

Now, I don't want to sidetrack us too much from the theme of this letter by going down the hole of all the details of what slavery was like in the Roman Empire because Paul doesn't make the institution of slavery the topic of his letter. But I will note that Rome was filled with slaves, many of whom functioned as indentured servants. That is, they'd provide some task for the owner, and in turn, he'd care for them, house them, feed them, and sometimes even provide for their further education.

Now, that sounds odd to us that the master of a slave would provide for their education, but you don't need to have in your mind American nineteenth century slavery. A man would sometimes utilize slaves to teach his children as their school teacher, and so their education was crucial. Slaves could be doctors and more. Moreover, slavery in Rome wasn't founded in race, but came from individuals who were prisoners of war, debtors who couldn't pay their debts, etc. In other words, I am not suggesting it was a glorious thing or without abuse, but we shouldn't think in terms of the nature of slavery as known in the earlier days of our country as if it were a one-to-one copy. Perhaps somewhere between how we think of slavery and how we think of employment would be a good way to think of it.

Anyway, somehow Onesimus was separated from Philemon. Paul makes reference to the fact that Onesimus was "parted from [Philemon] for a while" (v. 15). But we shouldn't think of this as if it were some benevolent act on Onesimus's part, as if he were accidentally separated, though he would have wished to stay with Philemon. It's best to think of him fleeing and leaving Philemon. We can say that because Paul says to Philemon that whatever wrong he's suffered because of Onesimus being away from him, Paul would repay personally (vv. 18-19), which suggests that Onesimus had intentionally fled from Philemon.

But here's where the story gets good. When Onesimus fled from Philemon, he somehow came into contact with Paul, while Paul was in prison. We don't know how exactly, but that doesn't matter. What *does* matter is that when they came into contact, Paul led Onesimus to Christ. Onesimus became a Christian. Again, we can see this throughout the letter. Most explicitly, Paul refers to Onesimus in verse 12 as "my child," noting that he'd become a father to him in his imprisonment. Paul means, of course, that Onesimus had become his spiritual child, meaning he'd led him to faith. And Paul further solidifies the idea that Onesimus had become a Christian by playing on Onesimus's name, which means "useful," by writing in verse 11, "Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful to you and to me." Moreover, during this time that Onesimus had been with Paul, their relationship as believers had grown strong. Paul refers to him as "my heart" in verse 12, and notes that he would love to keep Onesimus with him in verse 13.

But here's where we get to the crux of the letter. Though Onesimus is beneficial to Paul, Paul doesn't want to wrong Philemon. He doesn't want to keep Onesimus without Philemon's consent (v. 14) since Philemon has every right to have Onesimus back and working for him. Therefore, Paul sends Onesimus back to Philemon (with this letter), asking Philemon not to punish Onesimus but to receive him as Philemon would receive Paul (v. 17), not merely as a servant but as a "beloved brother" (v. 16). Moreover, Paul offers to repay Philemon for any wrong he's suffered by Onesimus fleeing from him (vv. 18-19). Paul even strongly suggests that Onesimus could be returned to Paul to work with him. And as Paul wraps up the letter, he has great confidence that Philemon will respond well, no doubt anticipating him warmly receiving Onesimus back, charging Paul nothing, and perhaps even freeing Onesimus at cost to himself to go back and serve with Paul. That is, he expects Philemon to do what Paul is asking him and "even more" (v. 21).

Now, with the general content of the events and letter in our mind, I think we can say a few things about what it means for us to follow Christ as Lord based on the events we've described and the nature of this letter. First, we can say that following Christ means that we make it our aim to please the Lord.

### **Following Christ means that we make it our aim to please the Lord**

Imagine if you were reading this letter as an unbeliever. The whole thing would feel weird and over the top to you, no doubt. Put aside for a second the issue of whether slavery should have existed in the Roman empire in the first century or not. Here is a man, in Philemon, who had a slave flee from him. And now Paul is sending Onesimus back to Paul with a letter that basically tells Philemon what to do in response to this wrong that's been done to him.

Now, to be fair, Paul isn't *commanding* Philemon. He even says in verse 8, "Though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do what is required, yet for love's sake I prefer to appeal to you." But even writing that sentence communicates pressure, doesn't it? I mean, imagine if I said to you, "Now, I have every right to command you to do what is required of you, but instead, I'm just going to appeal to you in love to do it." Nothing about that suggests you should feel free to do whatever you want, does it? By saying I could command you to do what is required, but I want you to do it from your own will, I'm putting some serious pressure on you to do this thing. Both the acknowledgement that I could command you and the use of the phrase "what is *required*" leaves little suggestion that you really have a choice of what to do. And the pressure Paul is applying doesn't stop with that sentence in verse 8. He tells Philemon in verse 17 to "receive [Onesimus] as you would receive me." Again, he's flat telling him what to do.

And, consider that for Philemon, this is no light matter. He has had a slave run away from him, while most likely having other slaves. What is going to happen if he receives Onesimus back with a big hug, saying, "You're forgiven, brother"? My guess is that it could make life quite hard as the other slaves would take note. And yet, Paul is telling him to do just that.

Moreover, though this is a costly request, Paul doesn't suggest at all that he'd understand if Philemon wanted to handle this differently. Rather, he continues to mount the pressure. He reminds Philemon in verse 19 that he owes Paul his very life—probably because Paul brought the gospel to him. And in verse 21, he writes, “Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say,” even telling him to prepare a guest room for his visit—which suggests a little more pressure to do the right thing (v. 22). I mean, imagine how odd it'd be if Philemon doesn't do what Paul says when Paul arrives for that visit.

Do you see why I say an unbeliever would probably find this whole thing more than a little strange? They'd probably say, “Mind your own business, Paul. This matter doesn't concern you.” They might even want to say to Paul, “How dare you!” So why should that not be our response as well? Well, the answer is that Philemon is a believer, and Paul knows that when someone signs up to follow Christ, the aim of their life *necessarily* becomes focused on pleasing the Lord. For you and me—if we claim to be followers of Christ—the aim of our lives isn't to do what is easiest or brings us most praise or happiness or whatever else. The aim of our lives must be to please the Lord. Paul explicitly wrote this to the Corinthians, saying in 2 Corinthians 5:9, “So whether we are at home or away, we make it our aim to please him.” We make it our aim to please the Lord. That's what Christians do. And because Paul knows that Philemon is a professing follower of Christ, he can talk to Philemon with the assumption that Philemon's aim is to do what is most pleasing to Jesus. That's what Paul knows, and it forms the foundation for the whole of this letter. Otherwise, this letter makes no sense. Believers can simply assume when talking to another believer that the aim of that brother or sister's life is to please the Lord.

And it's worth us pausing and asking if that's true of us. Is this the aim of your life? If not, not only are we committing idolatry, but it may be that the source of our discontentment in life is that we've made all the wrong things the aim of our lives. But, if you make it your aim to please the Lord, there is nothing about your position, place, or lot in life that can prevent you from living a life that is pleasing to the Lord. So, let's make that our aim. So, that's the first, foundational, thing we must recognize following Christ means that we make it our aim to please the Lord. Second, we need to realize that following Christ means that we may incur great personal cost.

### **Following Christ means that we may incur great personal cost**

All the individuals in this story who follow Christ either have incurred or are being asked to incur great personal cost. First, let's start with Paul. Paul writes this letter from prison. He opens the letter writing, “Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus” (v. 1). He reiterates in verses 9-10 that he's a prisoner for Christ. Then, he notes again in verse 13 that he is bearing “imprisonment for the gospel.” And, finally, he references Epaphras in verse 23 as his “fellow prisoner.” So, Paul writes from prison, and he is in prison because he's made it his aim to please Christ, and the Lord has demanded of him that he puts himself in harm's way. In other words, Paul is in prison because he's been obedient to Christ's commands. Following Christ is costing him personally. And rather than moaning and complaining about it, Paul is actually willing to incur greater personal cost if necessary in order to please the Lord. He wants to see reconciliation so badly between Philemon

and Onesimus that he tells Philemon that if Onesimus's debts need to be paid, then he'll repay them personally (v. 19).

Now, this raises a question. Why does Paul mention his imprisonment so frequently? I mean, in these few verses, he explicitly mentions that he is a prisoner five times. I think it's because he's establishing this foundational point—to follow Christ is to be willing to incur great personal cost, even as Paul has done here. And that sets the stage for everything he tells Philemon and Onesimus to do.

Let's see how this plays out with Onesimus. He's escaped slavery. He's become a believer, and therefore life is supposed to get easier, right? Well, not exactly. Paul sends Onesimus back to the one who was his master, the very one from whom he escaped. Paul mentions this in verse 12, writing, "I am sending him back to you, sending my very heart."

Why would Paul send back Onesimus? Well, because Onesimus is now a follower of Christ, and following Christ means that your utmost aim is to do what is pleasing to the Lord. And in this situation, the thing that is most pleasing to the Lord is that he is reconciled with Philemon, for he is not only your master whom you've done wrong to but a brother in Christ with whom you need to walk in fellowship. Again, for Onesimus, following Christ means being willing to incur great personal cost. After all, what if Philemon doesn't respond well to his fleeing? And that brings us to Philemon.

Paul expects Philemon to be willing to incur great personal cost. We've already noted it, but he is told to receive Onesimus as he would receive Paul—which is to say, don't punish him for his wrongdoing. Now, that may provoke difficulty with the other slaves and make Philemon's life harder, but that's part of the cost. In fact, Paul wants Philemon, I believe, to let Onesimus come and serve with Paul. Paul writes in verses 13-14, "I would have been glad to keep him with me, in order that he might serve me on your behalf during my imprisonment for the gospel, but I preferred to do nothing without your consent in order that your goodness might not be of compulsion but of your own accord." It's impossible to read that without hearing Paul making the request to Philemon to free Onesimus of his own accord so that this new believer might come serve alongside of Paul. And that necessitates Philemon incurring great personal loss.

But again, this is common for the believer. Following Christ, who gave his life for us, means that we must be willing to give our lives for his sake. For some, that means martyrdom. We've seen that throughout history. For others, it will mean sacrificing conveniences or pleasures this world offers. But that's okay, because our aim is to please the Lord. And so even if it costs us, our great goal is to please our Lord. And this leads us to a final note. Following Christ means that we labor for the good of the church.

### **Following Christ means that we labor for the good of the church**

One of the questions we may be asking is, "What is pleasing to our Lord?" After all, if that's our aim, we must answer this question. And there are many answers to this in day-to-day life that we

answer as we keep looking at the Word, what it commands of us, and flesh that out in a myriad of ways. But one big category we can note is that if we're going to make it our aim to please the Lord, then we should labor for the good of the church. Obviously, this means that we don't gossip or slander or malign Christ's people—his church and bride—to others. But it means more

Notice that when Paul describes how thankful he is for Philemon, he is constantly referring to his labors for the good of the church. He writes in verses 4-7, "I thank my God always when I remember you in my prayers, because I hear of your love and of the faith that you have toward the Lord Jesus and *for all the saints*, and 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." Philemon's love for Jesus and obedience to his Lord is pictured for Paul in his love for and service of the saints. To love Jesus necessarily means we express that love toward his church.

Also, notice that Paul writes this letter to Philemon *and others*. He mentions Apphia, Archippus, and the church. Now, as he goes on, he directs everything to Philemon. He says nothing to Apphia, Archippus, or the rest of the saints there. We don't even know who these people are. Some have suggested this is Philemon's wife and son. Maybe. But we just don't know.

But the question is, why would Paul address the letter to the whole church when he spends all his time simply interacting with Philemon? And I think the answer is that Paul recognizes that Philemon's response will affect the whole church. As believers, our actions don't merely affect others. They affect the church. And therefore we must factor into how we live the effect it will have on the church. We must always consider what is best for the church. Paul adds a level of accountability to Philemon by writing to all, but he no doubt anticipates Philemon is already eager to do what is best for the church because that's what Christians do. It's what we must do. We aim to please Jesus, are willing to incur great personal cost, and we seek what is best for the church. But all of this is worth it, isn't it?

I mean, in some ways we've buried the lede this morning. This is an awesome story of God working in an amazing way, isn't it? A slavery runs away from his master only to be found by Christ, converted, and now will get to walk alongside Philemon as a fellow believer. And now, no matter what happens to Onesimus, he's going to know eternal life. And it's that which makes our sacrifices for following Jesus no sacrifice at all. As we make it our aim to please our Lord and labor for the good of his people, it may cost us much in this life. But that's okay because we have life to come. Even if it costs us our very lives, we'll rise and be with the one who lived, died, and was raised for us. You simply cannot sacrifice for Jesus. It's impossible. So as we come to the table this morning, let's commit afresh to make it our aim to please our Lord in all things, look for the good of his church, and be willing to incur great personal cost, if necessary, as we await his coming. Amen.