Sermon Notes

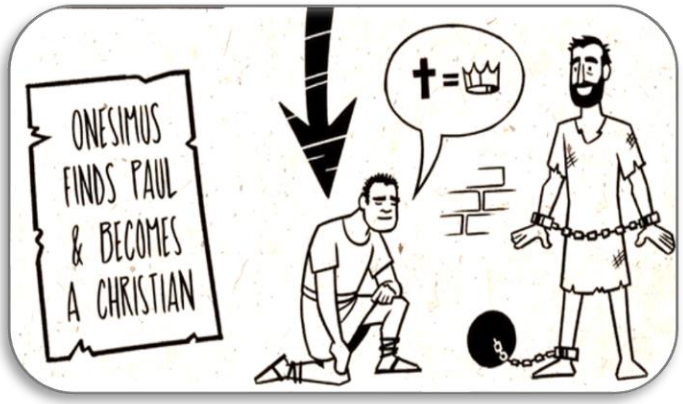
Sunday, November 15th, 2026
Big Things In Small Packages:
The Letter to Philemon

Key Verses:

1 Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, To Philemon our dear friend and fellow worker— **2** also to Apphia our sister and Archippus our fellow soldier—and to the church that meets in your home: **3** Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. **4** I always thank my God as I remember you in my prayers, **5** because I hear about your love for all his holy people and your faith in the Lord Jesus. **6** I pray that your partnership with us in the faith may be effective in deepening your understanding of every good thing we share for the sake of Christ. **7** Your love has given me great joy and encouragement, because you, brother, have refreshed the hearts of the Lord's people. **8** Therefore, although in Christ I could be bold and order you to do what you ought to do, **9** yet I prefer to appeal to you on the basis of love. It is as none other than Paul—an old man and now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus— **10** that I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, who became my son while I was in chains. **11** Formerly he was useless to you, but now he has become useful both to you and to me. **12** I am sending him—who is my very heart—back to you. **13** I would have liked to keep him with me so that he could take your place in helping me while I am in chains for the gospel. **14** But I did not want to do anything without your consent, so that any favor you do would not seem forced but would be voluntary. **15** Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back forever— **16** 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. **17** So if you consider me a partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. **18** If he has done you any wrong or owes you anything, charge it to me. **19** I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand. I will pay it back—not to mention that you owe me your very self. **20** I do wish, brother, that I may have some benefit from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in Christ.
21 Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I ask. **22** And one thing more: Prepare a guest room for me, because I hope to be restored to you in answer to your prayers. **23** Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends you greetings. 24 And so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas and Luke, my fellow workers. 25 The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.

Background:

The apostle Paul is a prisoner in Rome when he writes this letter. According to Acts 28:16 he is held in a rented home for 2 years while he waits on his appeal to Caesar. He is kept in chains and kept under watch by the Praetorian guards but is free to receive visitors. One of those visitors was a man named Onesimus. Onesimus was a runaway slave from Colossae who had somehow wronged his master, Philemon. Paul led Onesimus to faith in Christ and wants to keep him as Onesimus has now lived up to his name. (Onesimus means "useful.") However, he is aware of this unresolved conflict between two brothers in Christ and is now faced with the question:



"What is the right thing to do in this situation?"

Paul is sending Onesimus and Tychicus back to Colossae with this letter and the letter of Colossians (see Colossians 4:7-9.) Philemon is Paul's answer to the question on the personal level. Colossians provides the theological framework.

➢ Short Answer:

Paul sends Onesimus home and urges Philemon to receive Onesimus back not as a "slave," but as a "dear brother" (Phm 16)—even asking him to receive Onesimus back as he would receive Paul himself.

Questions: ***Why would Paul ask Philemon to upset the social order of their day and treat Onesimus as a family member instead of a slave? And what is the responsibility of Christians who have hurt others?***

Note: Paul's answer is built on his theological framework that the gospel creates new relationships between people who have every reason to be divided. This is possible through…

- SHARED identities in Christ
- RECONCILIATION through Christ
- REPENTANCE toward Christ and one another

➢ Key Terms:

- **Share/ Fellowship/ Partnership (Koinonia)**: *"When two or more people share or partner together in something."*
  Paul prays in v 6 that Philemon's partnership (koinonia) in the faith might deepen his understanding of every good thing that we share in Christ. He appeals to koinonia in v17. If Paul really is Philemon's partner then he should be willing to see Onesimus as his partner since Onesimus is now his brother. They have been given new identities in Christ which change the way that they identify one another.

  "10 (You) have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator. 11 Here there is no Gentile or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all." (Colossians 3:10)

  Note: All who belong to Jesus also belong to one another. What we share in Jesus we are to share with each other. Theologically, Paul expects Philemon to *SHARE* the same grace and forgiveness he has received from Christ to a fellow Christian who has wronged him.

  "12 Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. 13 Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. 14 And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity. 15 Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace." (Colossians 3:12-15)

- **Reconcile: "***To restore or make something compatible that was at odds."*
  Sharing (koinonia) is only possible through reconciliation.
  Forgiveness is freeing the other from a debt that is owed. (I won't punish you even though you deserve it. I won't make you pay!) Reconciliation is restoring the relationship.
  Both are possible with God because the debt has been paid. God doesn't simply release us from punishment. He restores us. He makes us family.

  "19 For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, 20 and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross. 21 Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior. 22 But now he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation. (Colossians 1:19-22)

"13 When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, 14 having canceled the charge of our legal indebtedness, which stood against us and condemned us; he has taken it away, nailing it to the cross. (Colossians 3:13-14.)

Philemon, Onesimus and Paul all stood in need of Christ. Each of them had experienced forgiveness and reconciliation through the cross of Christ. The cross that reconciled them vertically to their Creator is meant to also bring horizontal reconciliation with one another.

The forgiveness we receive we share. The restored relationship we have been given we extend to others. We are called to be ambassadors of forgiveness and ministers of reconciliation.

"Everything is from God, who has reconciled us to himself through Christ and has given us the ministry of reconciliation." (II Corinthians 5:18)

- ✓ Note: Paul as the mediator is basically saying:

Philemon- "You received grace now share it."
Onesimus- "You wronged your brother, make it right. He is your brother too."
Paul- "I will stand in the gap and absorb the cost."

- **Repentance**: *(Hebrew- Shuv) "to turn or return"- a relational act and not simply stopping bad behavior.*
  (Greek- Metanoia) "change of mind" an internal shift that leads to external change.
  Flow of thought: Koinonia <= Reconciliation <= Repentance
  Philemon was to take Onesimus back and treat him as a brother.
  Onesimus was responsible for seeing Philemon as a brother and making things right.
  Note: Paul is willing to pay Onesimus' debt. He embodies Christ as a "minister of reconciliation." If Philemon was not willing or able to fully take Philemon back as a brother without Philemon being able to pay him back, then Paul would pay him back. Even though Philemon owed Paul his life.

➢ Application:

At the foot of the cross, the slave owner and the slave are in need of grace.
Because of the cross, the one who is wrong and the one who was wronged share that grace.
We are all ministers of reconciliation. And we are either all Onesimus's or Philemons…or both.
What we share in Christ must become bigger than what separates us.
Reconciliation with one another is not optional. It is imperative. Jesus takes the matter seriously. He tells us this…
15 "If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. (Mark 18:15)
23 "Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, 24 leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to them; then come and offer your gift. (Matthew 5:23-24)

Who do you need to make things right with this week?