

Philemon

Text: Philemon 1

Series Overview: Philippians, Philemon, Colossians and Ephesians are collectively referred to as the "Prison Letters." The Apostle Paul wrote them while he was imprisoned in Rome. The prison was probably a house where Paul was kept under close guard at all times (probably chained to a soldier). But he was given a number of freedoms not offered to most prisoners. Among them was the freedom to write letters and receive visitors.

The letters Paul wrote were addressed to churches he had started. And even though they dealt with the kind of practical issues you might expect new churches to be dealing with, they are also bold declarations of theological truth. They are messages to the faithful about what God intended the church to be and to do. It is a clarification of the church's mission and identity. Paul is basically saying to the church, "THIS IS US. This is who we are." The church is not a perfect place and it's not always easy living out our faith. But it is possible. And when we do it, it changes the world.

Overview: Onesimus was a domestic slave who belonged to Philemon, a wealthy man and a member of the church in Colossae. Onesimus had run away from Philemon and had made his way to Rome, where he met Paul, who apparently led him to Christ. Paul convinced Onesimus that running from his problems wouldn't solve them, and he persuaded Onesimus to return to Philemon. Paul then writes a letter to Philemon, asking him to forgive Onesimus and embrace him like a family member, an equal. This explosive request was asking Philemon to upset the power and societal structures that existed in the Roman World. Why? Because Christ's work on the cross has leveled the playing field for all follower of Jesus to now be in a shared partnership.. As members of one family, we are now called to overturn any and every power and societal structure that keeps some people in positions in which they have more value or worth than others by embracing each other as members of the same family. Paul is making it clear that the personal decision to follow Christ, has public implications for how we interact with society and its power structures.

Resources: Check out <https://thebibleproject.com/explore/philemon/> for more information on the book of Philemon.

WELCOME

DISCUSSION

A. Getting Warmed Up

- Have you ever been in the middle of a conflict that required someone to advocate for reconciliation? What was the circumstance? Tell the story.

B. Digging In

- Read aloud Philemon 1:1-25
- Why did Onesimus go to Paul? What happened while he was with Paul?
- What did Paul ask Philemon to do?
- Why would this have been so difficult? What was the societal power hierarchy that this action would have challenged?

C. Bringing It Home

- Beth said that in the 21st century we not longer use words like slave and master. But there are still power structures in which certain people are in positions of supremacy over other people and because of that supremacy they receive certain privileges that other people aren't entitled. These structures exist within race, gender, social-economic class, and even which side of 270 you live on.
 - Where and how have you seen these power structures?
 - Whether you are active or passive, if you are apart of society, you are apart of these systems. Where do you fit in these systems?* Are their people in the group that are at different places in the system? (*changes are you may be apart of a few different systems. In one system you are in a place of privilege, but in another you are not.)
 - Why is it that in Christ, these systems are no longer valid?
 - What are the obstacles that make it difficult to upset the system by embracing one another as members of the same family, equals?
 - What could a person in a place of privilege do to advocate for someone who is not? What could you do?

CLOSING PRAYER: Pray for those you have named who need an advocate.
