

PHILEMON
"THE CHURCH FAMILY!"

The Church family – it is all about relationships! We talk about family and community and belonging together and love; these are high ideals to which we should all aspire as Christians and to which we as church should aspire together. Jesus teaches us to love one another; more, Jesus models what that love looks like when He met people in need and ultimately when He sacrificed Himself to die on the cross, showing the full extent of His love we're told. The challenge for us as Christians and together as Church is to love one another, to put Jesus' teaching into practice, to learn to be like Him in the way we treat one another and not just when we are here on Sunday, but the way in which we treat other people in family, friends, in the street, with our neighbours, with the people we work beside, or live beside. Is this the hardest challenge we face?

The reality can be very different, of course. Have you ever felt bullied in church? In a leadership meeting? In a group you've been part of? Have you ever felt manipulated into a decision you weren't happy with but a strong minded individual "forced" you to go their way? Were you put under "unfair pressure"? If the boot was on the other foot, have you ever taken revenge on someone who has mistreated you, or got your own back on someone for their bullying, or harassed them back? You persuade yourself that they deserve it and it is quite fair, but not very Christian! You see why I say that getting on with other people can be the hardest thing we do? We have an ideal, a model, but we also have instincts that are tainted with sin, the dark side to human nature that wants "me" to be first, second and last and anything that gets in my way is to be resisted. There is a battle going on inside us: to love or not to love, to put me first or to love others as Jesus loved me? Which is it to be?

In Paul's letter to Philemon we have an example of relationships shaped by the gospel, people in whom Jesus' love lived and who demonstrated that love in all of their relationships. Does it need some persuading? Perhaps. But the end result is a Church family made stronger and Christian love and grace seen at work. Philemon was part of the church in Colosse, maybe even a leader; Colosse was a market-town in Turkey, by this time not such an important place but on the trade route East from Ephesus. Paul never visited Colosse as far as we know, but he had a good friend called Epaphras who came from Colosse and took the gospel back there after he was converted under Paul's ministry. By the time of this letter, Philemon had also been converted and maybe the church met in his house. Like most households in the first century, Philemon had slaves; slaves had no rights, they were treated as part of the furniture, property to be bought and sold. Onesimus was a slave in Philemon's house and he has run away, perhaps after stealing from his master. What is to be done?

There are three key relationships in this story: Paul and Onesimus; Philemon and Onesimus; Paul and Philemon. They are all different relationships, but all of them have one thing in common; these are relationships shaped by the gospel and by the grace of God. What shapes our relationships? Grace? Ego? Sacrificial love? Self-centredness? Nothing is automatic!

Paul and Onesimus: We're not sure how they met. Paul is in prison, probably in Rome; the apostle and the preacher, the Christian in prison for his faith. Onesimus, a slave, the lowest of the low; he might be educated, an intelligent man, but a man with no rights, who can be bought and sold. He is a runaway which makes his life forfeit, and he might also be a thief. Two men who have little in common, who seem to have nothing to join them together. Except that Onesimus has become a Christian by Paul's ministry. "*I then...*" (*Philemon v9f*) A family bond has grown up: it is a father-son like bond, where these two men have formed a deep love for one another, a bond that binds them despite their differences. Onesimus has become dear to Paul, who wants to keep him around because he has grown to depend on him in some way. "*I would...*" (*Philemon v13*)

This is the beauty of the church. We are all different people, with different personalities, different backgrounds, who have done different jobs, who are at different ages and stages in life, but we are challenged to learn to belong together, to learn to depend on one another. That is hard at times and at times we rub each other up the wrong way, but then we discover that we all have something in common – Jesus has done the same thing in all of us, has given us grace, has saved us, has loved us. Accept one another; learn to depend on one another for support, prayer, and working together. This is the Church family of which everyone of us is a piece.

Philemon and Onesimus: “formerly...” (Philemon v11) It is not a great starting point for a good relationship, one of us is useless! That is how Philemon saw his runaway slave and perhaps how Onesimus saw himself. I certainly meet lots of people who are persuaded they are useless; someone has told them that, maybe even repeatedly as a form of control, a form of bullying; it takes a lot to shift that sense of uselessness. What now for Onesimus? If he goes back, the normal repercussion would be punishment of some kind, maybe even death; would Philemon take revenge on him for stealing and running away? Philemon would be quite within his rights! *“perhaps the...” (Philemon v15f)* Onesimus might still be a slave but there are two other ways to see him: first, he is a man, not just a piece of property; secondly, he is a brother in Jesus, who shares the same faith, the same grace. These two facts are to change Philemon’s way of seeing Onesimus, his way of thinking. We presume that it works.

How do we see each other? The picture comes from the 1960’s USA and the Civil Rights marches when black people were campaigning for equal rights; the tabard says “I am a man!” because some white people regarded black people as nothing, not even as people; they were on a level with goods and chattels to be bought and sold! Look round the room; who presents you with the biggest challenge in terms of getting on with them? What’s the first thing that comes to mind when see that person? What difference would it make to that relationship if our first thought was: “This person is a human being just like me, with qualities and faults just like I have”? What difference would it make if the second thought was: “this person believes in Jesus as I do, is loved by God just as I am.” The quality of our relationships starts with the way we think about each other; if we think of each other as nuisances or as useless, then our relationships will be poor; if we think of each other as fellow human beings and as brothers and sisters in Jesus, then our relationships will be much better. These are relationships shaped by grace and the gospel.



Paul and Philemon: “Your love...” “Prepare a...” (Philemon vv7,22) There is a deep, lasting love between these two Christians, caring for one another, encouraging one another, serving one another. Because Paul loves both Onesimus and Philemon, he can stand in the middle of their relationship and be the person to bring them back together again. *“if you...” (Philemon v17)* To Philemon, Paul says, “See Onesimus, see Paul!” He is to treat the slave as he would treat the apostle! His concern for both Philemon and Onesimus becomes the motivation, and Paul works for the good of both. Some criticise the apostle for not being an advocate to Philemon for getting rid of his slaves altogether, that somehow he is complicit in slavery and that is a fault. But that is to read our sensitivities back into another culture. Paul advocates Philemon having a different way of thinking: other slave owners would take retribution on a runaway slave; others would continue to treat their slave as a piece of property. Paul

advocates Philemon treating his slave differently, as a man, as a brother, with attitudes that are very different to the culture around, with attitudes shaped by the gospel.

Slavery has not gone away. In the second picture you see a hand that is like prison bars; you can see under the hand there is a person caught, who can't escape; on top there is a person working to free that imprisoned individual, by moving the hand. Tearfund estimates that there are 46 million people in slavery around the world today, 21million in fashion industry alone, making garments around the world, forced labour to make these garments cheaply. Edinburgh Airport has a modern slavery statement – “here is what we are doing to combat slavery and human trafficking!” in 2019. Many are slaves in the sex industry and the stories are horrendous. What do we do? It is far away and overseas? But it's not, if Edinburgh airport has a slavery statement! “These are people we don't know” – that's true, but these are someone's sons and especially daughters! These are people who are given no rights, who have no voice of their own, who have nobody to speak up for them. Can we be their advocates? Just like Paul stood in the gap between Philemon and Onesimus and challenged Philemon to think better about his slave, can we stand in that gap, add our voices to Tearfund or other campaigns and make a difference in our world? These are relationships shaped by gospel in another way, caring for the least and lowest in our society? To the world who may see slaves, we can also make them see millions of people who stand beside these slaves and say that slavery is a bad thing!



Relationships shaped by grace and by the gospel. Accept one another as people who belong to the family together, as people in all of whom Jesus has done same thing, as people loved by Jesus and graced by God. Good relationships begin when we think well of each other: the other is a human being just as we are; the other shares the same faith as we have; they might be annoying, but... It is painful to see people we love being hurt or abused or bullied; love them, support them, can we speak up for them? Paul, Onesimus and Philemon show us what love looks like in awkward places; in our awkward relationships can we learn to love one another in the way Jesus loves?