

NOTES FROM TIM GAMSTON'S SERMON- Sunday 8th December 2024 pm

TITLE: "The life of Christ in the heart of man" TEXT: Philemon

Scripture references from the ESV

Philemon: Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, To Philemon our beloved fellow worker² and Apphia our sister and Archippus our fellow soldier, and the church in your house:³ Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

⁴ I thank my God always when I remember you in my prayers, ⁵ because I hear of your love and of the faith that you have towards the Lord Jesus and for all the saints, ⁶ 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. ⁷ For I have derived much joy and comfort from your love, my brother, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you.

⁸ Accordingly, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do what is required, ⁹ yet for love's sake I prefer to appeal to you—I, Paul, an old man and now a prisoner also for Christ Jesus—¹⁰ I appeal to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I became in my imprisonment. ¹¹ (Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful to you and to me.)¹² I am sending him back to you, sending my very heart. ¹³ 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, ¹⁴ but I preferred to do nothing without your consent in order that your goodness might not be by compulsion but of your own accord. ¹⁵ For this perhaps is why he was parted from you for a while, that you might have him back for ever, ¹⁶ no longer as a slave but more than a slave, as a beloved brother—especially to me, but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord.¹⁷ So if you consider me your partner, receive him as you would receive me. ¹⁸ If he has wronged you at all, or owes you anything, charge that to my account. ¹⁹ I, Paul, write this with my own hand: I will repay it—to say nothing of your owing me even your own self. ²⁰ Yes, brother, I want 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 say. ²² At the same time, prepare a guest room for me, for I am hoping that through your prayers I will be graciously given to you.

²³ Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends greetings to you, ²⁴ and so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke, my fellow workers.²⁵ The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.

We have probably heard the expression 'The pen is mightier than the sword,' which reminds us of the power of words to persuade and influence, even changing the course of history. Paul picks this up in **2 Corinthians 10:4: For the weapons of our warfare are**

not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds. It is not physical weapons that destroy the strongholds of the world, the flesh and the devil. The weapons we need to use are the sword of the Spirit and praying in the Spirit. These are what the Spirit of God uses to set people free from slavery to sin, Satan and death. Again, Paul writes: **For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek** (Romans 1:16).

The Gospel we have been given is the most powerful message in the entire world. The letter to Philemon shows us the power of the gospel to transform lives and impact human relationships. Onesimus had been a Roman slave in the service of Philemon, but he had stolen money and run away to Rome. Both crimes were capital offences under Roman law. Onesimus would have needed to spend the rest of his life in hiding. However, in God's gracious providence, Onesimus had come into contact with the Apostle Paul, who had shared the gospel with him and led him to put his faith in Christ. As a result, his life was changed, as Paul tells us in v11 (above). The name Onesimus means useful, which clearly, he had not been before, but after meeting Christ in the gospel

Onesimus is able to live up to his name

Through coming to faith in Christ, Onesimus is no longer out for what he can get by stealing and running away. Instead, he is usefully serving Paul while the latter is under house arrest in Rome. He is helping Paul with his ministry by running errands, collecting provisions and delivering letters. More than that, he is willing to go back and seek to be reconciled with Philemon, who he had deserted and stolen from, even though Philemon had the power to have him executed. That is a remarkable change, and one which, as far as we know, was permanent. Scripture does not tell us what happened to him, but there is a strong tradition that Philemon sent Onesimus back to Paul in Rome, where he grew to become a great man of God, becoming the Bishop of Ephesus.

This is the power of the gospel of Christ to transform the life of a sinner

As believers, we do not need to coerce people into submitting to Christianity as cults do or give them a set of rules, which is just legalism. We are simply called to introduce people to Jesus, showing them his life, death and resurrection in the gospels. Then we are to trust in the Spirit to give them the gift of faith.

- The Gospel, that is the good news of Christ, is God's power to save people from sin, regardless of a person's nationality, social class or past sins.
- Onesimus is an example of this power of God to change the lives of sinners through the Gospel.

In this letter, Paul also shows us the power of the gospel to impact human relationships (v16).

**It is the power of the gospel that will restore a runaway slave to his master,
not as a slave, but as a brother in Christ.**

Despite all that Onesimus did in the past, Philemon welcomes him back into the church family, with Paul's letter giving weight to his testimony.

How is it possible to reach such a deep place of brotherly love? Three brotherly actions brought this about.

1. **Brotherly love.** This letter exudes love both for God and for those he brings into our lives. We can see:
 - Paul's love for Philemon (v1) and his love for Onesimus (v12)
 - Paul bears witness to Philemon's love for Christ, for Paul and for all the saints (vv4-7)

This is not soppy, sentimental love, but love resulting in action for the good of others and the glory of God. Philemon's love for Christ, and those Christ brings into his life, leads him to share his faith with them. His love extends to believers in Christ (v7).

- Love for Jesus and for humanity is seen in sharing our faith with unbelievers for their eternal good and Christ's glory
- Love for Jesus and love for humanity is seen in us when we refresh the hearts of the saints.

We should ask ourselves these questions:

- a) When unbelievers leave our presence, do they have a clearer understanding of who Jesus is, and a deeper desire to know him or have they only seen us?
- b) When God's people leave our presence, do they go with hearts refreshed, rejoicing in Jesus and their salvation or do they go with heavy hearts crushed by criticism, or despairing because of our cynicism?

2. Brotherly love will lead to **brotherly mediation**. In the Sermon on the Mount, amongst the characteristics we can expect to have as those united to him, Jesus includes this one: **“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God (Matthew 5:9)**. A person who has become a child of God through faith will be one who seeks to bring about reconciliation between offended parties, as Paul is seeking to do with Onesimus and Philemon. It is possible that Onesimus found himself convicted by the Spirit, having read these words of Jesus: **So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, ²⁴ leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift. (Matt 5:23-24)**. As Onesimus acknowledged his need to be reconciled with Philemon, Paul sought to mediate for him, knowing that the former slave was laying himself open to the possibility of being put to death for his crimes. Paul appealed to Philemon to forgive Onesimus and to accept him as a brother.

He could have done this in the form of a command, leaning on his authority as an apostle and pointing to what Jesus expects. However, he chose not to do it this way, and instead he appeals to the quality of brotherly love.

He opens up his heart of love for Onesimus, and speaks of his respect for Philemon, appealing to their gospel partnership (**vv8-17**). Paul’s aim is to see Onesimus reconciled to Philemon, and he is acting as peacemaker in a way that does not lead to a break in his relationship with the latter. He shows us that

We are to work at reconciliation through gentleness, respect and love.

3. **Brotherly sacrifice**. The wrong done to Philemon by Onesimus cries out for justice to be done. Philemon has suffered the loss of money, the loss of a labourer in his household and the shame brought to his reputation and to the church. Does reconciliation mean that this injustice does not matter, and Onesimus can just turn up as if nothing has happened? The wrongdoing does matter, and must be put right, as Paul indicates in **v18**. Then astonishingly, Paul takes over the letter writing from the scribe and goes on to say: **I, Paul, write this with my own hand: I will repay it (v19)**.

If Philemon wants to be reimbursed for his losses, Paul will sacrificially pay so that Onesimus can go free. Sometimes there is a cost to being a peacemaker. It might be:

- The cost of being misunderstood – people might think you are weak because you are holding out the hand of reconciliation
- The cost of being hurt again – in the past you have forgiven them, but then the person does the same thing and you are hurt again. Jesus calls us to forgive 70 x7 so you forgive again and again, without keeping count
- The cost of covering that person's sin by refusing to tell others about the wrong, or you put it right at your own cost. That requires wisdom to know when sin should be exposed to protect others, or the person needs to take responsibility for their actions.

Where brotherly love is operating, there will be brotherly mediation, which will require brotherly sacrifice

None of this is easy, so where do we find the capacity for this kind of love?

The brotherly love, mediation and sacrifice that we see in Paul and Philemon is

A reflection of the far greater brotherly love, mediation and sacrifice of our older brother, the Lord Jesus Christ.

He alone is the only source of this kind of brotherly action. Jesus is the one who:

- Loves us even when we are robbing him of his glory, running away from him and seeking to hide our crimes
- Mediates for us – the true peacemaker who reconciles us to God
- Sacrifices himself for us, taking our guilt and shame on himself, offering up his life to death on the cross

How do we act in faith so that we can experience the Spirit of God effecting this change in us?

a) We need to contemplate Christ. Philemon was a faith sharing brother with deep roots in Christ. That kind of faith happens only as we spend time contemplating the loveliness of Jesus and speaking with him about the beauty he shows us and the things he teaches us. We will never be Christlike if we are filling our minds with the ugliness of the world. As we gaze upon Jesus in the gospel, we will become more and more like him.

b) We need to step out in faith and seek to refresh hearts. We are to seek to relieve the burdens people carry, perhaps just by giving a word of encouragement to a brother or sister or mediating between two parties who are estranged from one another. Maybe we can open our home and show hospitality as Philemon did or show forgiveness to someone who has wronged us. It will be different for each one of us.

- Ask the Lord how you can act in ways that refresh the hearts of others, rather than burdening them.

c) As motivation, we can cultivate thankfulness. Paul opens the letter by praying.

It is a prayer of thankfulness to God for the life of Philemon

He thanks God for Philemon's love for Christ, his love for all the saints and for his faith in Christ. He gives thanks for the way Philemon shares his faith and refreshes the hearts of believers. As he gives thanks for Philemon, he is able to anticipate the way that Philemon will agree to welcome Onesimus back. Paul can see how Philemon will partner with him, Paul, refreshing his heart and obeying his appeal. He can even anticipate that Philemon will prepare a room for him if Paul can ever visit.

Paul is not finding fault with Philemon.

Instead, he is looking for evidences of God's grace in Philemon's life

and giving thanks to God for the way that grace is displayed in the life of his brother.

We would all have a much greater love for one another if we were to look for evidences of God's grace in each other's lives and give thanks to God for the way his grace is displayed.

Let us look for evidences of the life of Christ in each other's heart

Let us look to see how the gospel has transformed the lives of others

Then we will see how the gospel has an impact on our relationships