

## LIVE IT SO THEY SEE IT

Philemon

Have any of you watched some of these videos where colorblind people put on these special glasses that allows them to see colors for the first time? If you haven't, you need to. Just look it up: *colorblind people see color for the first time*. I must warn you: you'll need Kleenexes. It's so powerful that people often break down into tears as they see color for the first time. They realize how beautiful everything is and what they've been missing their entire life. The frequent expressions are, "*Everything is completely different. I see a different world. What have I been missing?*" One man expresses in disbelief how gorgeous a sunflower is. He never saw the sunflower yellow pop against the green leaves. In preparation for the sermon today, I didn't take for granted a field of wild sunflowers I was in while hunting earlier this week.

That's a lot like what the gospel is like for us. It enables us to see everything differently. We see the world differently. We see God differently. Ourselves differently. Others differently. It brings colorful light and life to a dark and dreary world. That's sort of what we're going to talk about today from this short little letter Paul wrote to Philemon. In the book of Mark, we just went through, we studied how Jesus came and died for our sins and was buried and rose from the dead so that whoever believes is saved and born again. That's the gospel. But in Philemon now, we're going to see the difference the gospel should make in our lives because the gospel isn't only something to believe. The gospel is something to be seen. We want to live it. We want people to see it. But we've got to start seeing our situations through the lens of the gospel.

As an introduction, I'll say this is the shortest letter of the apostle Paul and it's the most beautiful piece of correspondence between two individuals in existence. It's not some long and heavy theological treatise, but a very personal and tender-hearted letter. And in it is contained one of the most delightful pictures of the gospel of God's grace lived out between real people, in real relationships, in a real fallen world – the same world you and I live in. Chances are you are in a relationship with someone where there has been real conflict. Well, Philemon's going to give us an ancient glimpse into the way the apostle Paul counseled members of the early church to live out the gospel in their relationships. And we'll read it a bit at a time because I think if you do that, you'll experience a little bit of what the main recipient, Philemon, experienced.

### Verses 1-3

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

#### I. THE RECIPIENTS OF PAUL'S LETTER. (VV. 1-3)

**Paul**, with **Timothy**, is writing to his **beloved brother** in Christ and **fellow worker** in the gospel, **Philemon**. Verse 19 suggests that Philemon is a convert and disciple of Paul who is now a minister himself and has a church meeting in his house. Most think Philemon, a man from the Colossae region, probably heard the gospel from Paul while he taught just down the road in Ephesus for 2

years in the school of Tyrannus (Acts 19:9-10). The fact that he has a church meeting in his house and he is a slaveholder tells us he's likely wealthier than most (more about that in a bit).

He also mentions **Apphia** “*our sister*” in Christ and **Archippus** a “*fellow soldier*” in Christ’s army. Many believe Apphia is his wife and Archippus his older son, but that’s guesswork. I do like the thought of this being a family, serving Christ’s church in their home together but we really can’t know for sure. Colossians 4:17 does reveal Archippus is involved in the ministry somehow. Both Colossians and Philemon, we should note, go together as written and delivered at the same time. A man named **Tychicus** delivers these prison letters from Paul, who is likely sitting in a Roman prison approximately 60 AD (Eph. 6:21; Col. 4:7).

That’s one of the surprising elements I find in these letters, is how little Paul talks about his own pitiful circumstances. He’s not moaning and complaining about being in jail. He’s not down in the dumps but positive, concerned about others, and sees his circumstance as an opportunity to advance the gospel (he’s even punny!). There’s a touch of humor in this letter. It tells us he takes his own medicine when he says to rejoice in every circumstance because he knows God can use it. He sees his situation through the lens of the gospel.



### Gospel Vision Application #1

#### **The gospel allows us to see hope beyond our undesirable circumstances.**

Through the gospel, we understand that we ultimately possess everything he needs in Christ and therefore, our hope and joy is not based on circumstances. Where are you placing your hope today? If our hope is anywhere other than Jesus Christ our emotions are going to show it. We’ll be angry, anxious, fearful. We’re supposed to be known for our love and our faith, not anger and anxiety.

But notice that even though Paul is writing mainly to Philemon about a **private** relationship, there’s also a **public** element to it as it is addressed to the church too. **As the church observes Philemon’s response to Paul’s letter, it’s going to serve as a teachable moment for the whole church.**

### Verses 4-7

*“I thank my God always, making mention of you in my prayers, because I hear of your love and of the faith which you have toward the Lord Jesus and toward all the saints; and I pray that the fellowship of your faith may become effective through the knowledge of every good thing which is in you for Christ’s sake. For I have come to have much joy and comfort in your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you, brother.”*

## II. PAUL’S APPRECIATION OF PHILEMON. (VV. 4-7)

Paul begins the body of the letter upbeat by praising Philemon and encouraging him for being the man of God that he is. He mentions how he **prays** for Philemon (v. 4), how he is **thankful** for the genuineness of his **faith** which is expressed in his **love for the saints**. Philemon is a **joy** and **comfort** and **refreshment** to Paul and to the church in his house. In a world where there’s so much relational conflict, grudges held, and a lack of love between neighbors, Philemon was like a cold

iced tea on a hot day to Paul. Paul said that **hearts were refreshed** through him. Paul rejoiced when Christians lived well by **living the gospel** because when we live it out the gospel like Philemon, community flourishes. It's a community of grace, mercy, kindness, love, forgiveness.

### Gospel Vision Application #2 The gospel lived out produces flourishing in community.

Why is he praising him like this? Well, he's buffering Philemon for something that's coming. He's reminding him of how refreshing it is when someone lives out the gospel because he's going to have to live it out again with someone whom he has a bone to pick. **He has another opportunity to refresh Paul.**

#### Verses 8-17

*"Therefore [in light of what I just said about your character, Philemon] though I have enough confidence in Christ to order you to do what is proper, yet for love's sake I rather appeal to you – since I am such a person as Paul, the aged, and now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus – I appeal to you for [this is where Philemon would have choked on whatever he was eating] my child Onesimus, whom I have begotten in my imprisonment, who formerly was useless to you, but now is useful both to you and to me. I have sent him back to you in person, that is, sending my very heart, whom I wished to keep with me, so that on your behalf he might minister to me in my imprisonment for the gospel; but without your consent I did not want to do anything, so that your goodness would not be, in effect, by compulsion but of your own free will. For perhaps he was for this reason separated from you for a little while, that you would have him back forever, no longer a slave, but more than a slave, a beloved brother, especially to me, but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord. If then you regard me a partner, accept him as you would me."*

*But if he has wronged you in any way or owes you anything, charge that to my account; I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand, I will repay it (not to mention to you that you owe me even your own self as well). Yes, brother, let me benefit from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in Christ. Having confidence in your obedience, I write to you, since I know that you will do even more than what I say."*

### **III. PAUL'S APPEAL FOR ONESIMUS. (VV. 8-17)**

I have a feeling that when Philemon read the name **Onesimus**, he felt a surge of emotions – anger, confusion, maybe some bitterness, some wonder. You see, Onesimus was one of Philemon's slaves who had run away and likely with a large chunk of Philemon's cash. That's why in verse 18 Paul tells Philemon that whatever he owes you, *charge that to my account*. It could have been that Onesimus delivered this letter directly to Philemon with Tychicus, but I like the picture better of Onesimus hiding behind the barn while Tychicus delivers it to Philemon and Philemon standing there in shock.

Now, it is important to know that **slavery in the Roman culture was a quite different** than what we typically think of. First, there were millions of slaves in the Roman empire, some say 25 – 40

% of the population *or more* were slaves.<sup>1</sup> Second, it was **not always associated with ethnicity**; it wasn't always **permanent**, as many were released by age 30 (maybe bought their freedom, or gained Roman citizenship and were set free); slavery also acted as form of **bankruptcy**. If you were unable to pay your debts, you could sell yourself to pay off your creditors for the what it was worth. Many slaves were also owned by government or wealthy individuals and **lived quite comfortably** as doctors or accountants. It was an established part of the social structure.

But even this slavery, thankfully, was eventually overturned largely due to the influence of Christians, but notice that Paul never called for a church-wide rebellion to overturn it. But Paul knew the delicate balance he was living under – to start a revolution would be a bloodbath. He had the wisdom to know that **if the Christians lived out the gospel they'd be a strange community where slaves and masters were one in Christ and for Christ (Eph. 6:5-9), it would impact the world.** He doesn't outright say that Philemon should release Onesimus but I think it's alluded to subtly several times by Paul throughout the letter. Paul knows Onesimus can be set free to be a useful tool for Jesus.

However different this slavery was, **masters still very much controlled the life of their slaves** until they were set free and there were serious capital consequences for crimes like Onesimus committed by **thievery and running away**. Onesimus was **worthy of the death penalty** – even death by crucifixion. Actually, there was a papyrus fragment found that revealed masters had the legal right to track you down and kill you. They say bounty hunters could make good money hunting down runaway slaves. **Now think about this: Philemon has the legal right to do the same.** It would be a *normal worldly response*. But think about this also: Philemon is a Christian and that means his response should be different. He has been shown undeserved mercy and unearned grace in Christ for a debt he couldn't pay back either. Ephesians 4:32-5:2 says we're called to extend that to others.

**The Big Question: *Live out the world's way or live out the gospel?***  
***Is he going to see it through the world's lens or see as an opportunity to live the gospel?***

Paul wants him to see this as an opportunity to live out the gospel. Let's back up to verse 8 and start working our way through Paul's counsel to Philemon. First, take note of his **tender heartedness**. See his exemplary **gentleness and kindness**. Even though he could flex his apostolic authority and drop the hammer, he's modeling the attitude required. He knows a tender heart and **careful words** in a sensitive situation are more effective than commands when dealing with people in conflict. He's also **keeping the bigger picture in mind** that God reconciled us to Himself through the lovingkindness in Christ. He's asking Philemon to **respond to Onesimus as God responded to him.**

 **Gospel Vision Application #3**  
**The gospel is the ultimate model for handling relational conflict.**

Christians should be the wisest and healthiest people when it comes to interpersonal relationships because they've learned how God has dealt with them in their conflict with Him. That even while

we were sinners, He died for us. That should make us different in the way we treat others, shouldn't it? It takes gospel wisdom to work through wrongs like this and that's something Paul has.

Notice how he says, "*Paul, the aged.*" He's hinting at godly grandfather wisdom. Grandpa usually doesn't say a lot, but when he does, you listen because he's been there and done that. Well, Paul's been there. It reminds me of those **Farmers insurance commercials**, "*We know a thing or two because we've seen a thing or two.*" Paul's saying, "*Onesimus, respond wisely. Don't let your emotions or worldly instincts get the best of you. How you handle conflict matters. Your decisions matter. It's part of a bigger purpose and a bigger story. It's about your people seeing the gospel.*"

Look at how Paul's careful to describe his new relationship with Onesimus, this "sub-human slave" in many peoples' sight: He calls Onesimus his **child** (v. 10), his **very heart** (v. 12), a **brother** in the flesh and in the Lord; a **partner** in ministry (v. 17) and he'd love for Philemon to send him back to him because he's really **useful** to me in the ministry. Isn't that great? How many people do you think in the world at the time would say that about slaves? Paul, the Pharisee, has been transformed in the way he thinks about everyone, even Gentile slaves. It's because of the gospel.



#### Gospel Vision Application #4

**The gospel teaches us to see everyone as someone for whom Christ died.**

The gospel says **Jesus died for all** so that whoever believes in Him will have everlasting life. He died for the Jew, Gentile, rich, poor, male, female, free man, slave – he died for your enemy. On top of that, the Word of God teaches everyone is made in God's image (Gen. 1:27). **That we all have intrinsic value apart from what we look like, what we do, what we are known for. Every human being has rock solid, unchangeable worth and value.**

The world can't say that. Evolutionary theory ultimately results in you thinking of yourself as a temporal accident with no purpose or meaning in life or beyond this life. Humanistic science can say is that you're complex, but that's not the same as valuable. Your "value" starts to be based on your performance in it – in what you can provide for society's needs or the evolutionary chain. It's based on your *capacities* like reason, self-consciousness, moral choices, preferences. That's the Supreme Court argument and why babies, unborn and born, the elderly, and those with special needs can be wrote off. The Greco-Roman world tossed babies and people like that aside and the Christians were the ones who cared for all men and put that culture to shame. They rescued babies from the dump. Human rights started with the Church applying *imago dei* found in Genesis 1:27.

Christianity transformed the relationship between slaves and masters. The gospel brought a master and slave together on equal ground before the cross and to worship in the same pew. The masters treated slave like they had a Master in heaven and slaves served their masters like they served Christ (See Ephesians 6:5-9; I think Philemon and Onesimus sparked this teaching by Paul in this other prison epistle delivered by Tychicus). Think about Philemon again. Put yourself in his shoes: you have the opportunity to respond in a way totally strange to the way the world operates. You can respond to Onesimus as someone for whom Christ created and Christ died for.

Paul also wants him to see this whole situation not as some haphazard event or unfortunate turn of luck, but a door of divine opportunity. Not an accident, but more like an appointment.

 **Gospel Vision Application #5**  
See “unfortunate situations” as divine opportunities.

See that in verse 15, “*For perhaps he was for this reason separated from you for a little while, that you would have him back forever, no longer a slave, but more than a slave, a beloved brother...*” Reminds us of passages like Esther: “*for such a time as this*” or Genesis 50:20, “*What [Onesimus] meant for evil, God meant for good to bring about the present result.*” Paul’s saying, “*consider God’s sovereign hand working behind all of this so that through it, Onesimus would be saved and restored you better than before! Actually, by running away and being useless, you’ll have him back as a useful both to you and to the Lord, no longer serving you by way of eyeservice.*”

That takes us to **Paul’s first pun** is in verse 11, “*I appeal to you for my child Onesimus [which means useful], whom I have begotten in my imprisonment, who formerly was useless to you, but now is useful both to you and me.*” It’s a pun on his name because up until now, he clearly didn’t live up to it. It’s like a woman named Grace who continually harbors grudges.<sup>ii</sup> “Useless” is in the past now because he’s a new creation. Christ has transformed him. He will serve Philemon as he serves Christ (Eph. 6:5-8). He won’t ignore Philemon’s phone calls anymore. He’s really changed.

 **Gospel Vision Application #6**  
**The gospel transforms lives, making them useful to God.**

You can’t help but think of the prodigal son story Jesus told. He runs away from home with all this money and spends it all on loose living. When he comes to his senses, he returns home to welcome arms and everyone celebrates. Onesimus thought he could run away with all that cash too, thinking he’d blend in in Rome with other alias runaways, only to run right into Paul, his master’s mentor, and right into Chris – like it was planned or something. The story should encourage all the parents out there who have rebellious runaways. There’s no impossible situation with God. The further they get, sometimes the closer they are to returning. The more trouble and heartache, sometimes the greater the rejoicing and blessing in the end.

I’m sure as Onesimus grew in the Lord, he became **convicted of his need to restore his relationship** with his master like a runaway child. He probably couldn’t get Jesus words out of his head: “*if you are presenting your offering at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your offering there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and present your offering.*”

#### **IV. PAUL’S PLEDGE TO PHILEMON. (VV. 18-25)**

### Paul & the Gospel

**Paul** basically says, “*Charge me. Whatever he took from you, charge me in his place.*” Obviously Philemon would never charge Paul and Paul alludes to that nature of his comment by saying, “*Don’t forget, you owe yourself to me – you were saved by grace through my ministry.*” But “*Charge me.*” That should sound familiar because it’s what Christ did for us. Paul is living the gospel by paying Onesimus’ debt. It’s the doctrine of **substitution** and **imputation applied**. Christ died as our substitute. Our sins were placed on Him. In exchange, by faith, we receive His righteousness. He’s also Onesimus’ **advocate** as Jesus is for us in heaven (Zech. 3:1-5; 1 John 2:1)

### Onesimus & the Gospel

**Onesimus** is a living illustration of all sinners in the gospel who cannot pay a debt they owe. **His story is all of our stories.** Luther said, “*We’re all God’s Onesimus.*”<sup>iii</sup> Romans 3:12 says, “*All have turned away; all alike have become useless. There is no one who does what is good, not even one.*” Until Christ when we receive the power of the Spirit, we’re all slaves to sin and useless. Christians are those who have stopped running and found refreshment and reconciliation in Christ.

### Philemon & the Gospel

And **Philemon** is having to forgive Onesimus as Christ has forgiven him. He has to show undeserved and unearned grace to Onesimus that he has experienced himself in Christ. **What is he going to do? What are you going to do? What about that person you’re in conflict with?**



### Gospel Vision Application #7

**Living the gospel makes us useful and refreshing.**

Paul says **you and Philemon have the opportunity to be *refreshing* and *useful* by living the gospel.** Paul uses his **second pun** to lighten the matter in verse 10: “*Yes brother, let me benefit [oninemi] from you in the Lord.*” Oninemi has the same root as Onesimus. Onesimus is useful, but now is Philemon? By Philemon living out the gospel, he would be **useful** to Paul and to Christ, and that would **refresh** their hearts. In a world of anger, bitterness, and hatred, it’s so refreshing when people sacrificially and forgivingly live out the gospel. People see it and are struck by it.

You know the story has it, Philemon set Onesimus free. 50 years later when the early church father, Ignatius, was being transported from Antioch to Rome to be executed as a martyr, he wrote letters to churches. In writing to Ephesus, he praised their pastor Onesimus, even making the same Pauline pun on his name. We can’t be certain it’s the same Onesimus, but if it is, he went on into the ministry and became one of the greatest gospel stories of the Church.

That should tell us right there that the way we respond to conflict matters. Philemon could’ve said, but, “My money! My reputation! I want revenge!” But it wasn’t about him, was it? It’s about a bigger picture. A greater story. A story that the world needs to hear and to see.

### THE WORK OF RECONCILIATION

What Paul did for Onesimus parallels what Christ did for us.

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| <b>Onesimus had wronged Philemon and thus was separated from him.</b>                            | Sinners have wronged God and are thus separated from him (Rom. 3:23)   |
| <b>Paul had not been involved with Onesimus' guilt.</b>  | Jesus was sinless, separated from sinners (Heb. 4:15)  |
| <b>Paul wrote this letter to reconcile Onesimus and Philemon</b>                                 | Jesus' work on the cross reconciled sinners and holy God (2 Cor. 5:17-21)  |
| <b>The debt Onesimus had with Philemon had to be paid. [Onesimus couldn't pay it on his own]</b> | The penalty for sin had to be paid [and sinners could not pay it on their own]   |
| <b>Paul took on a debt that was not his own by promising to repay Philemon.</b>                  | Jesus took on the debt of sin that was not his own and paid it by his death (John 1:29; Romans 5:8-9; Hebrews 7:27; 9:26, 28). |

Taken from *Life Application Bible Commentary*, page 256

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<sup>i</sup> Charles R. Swindoll, *Swindoll's Living Insights New Testament Commentary Volume 9* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2017), 206.

<sup>ii</sup> Swindoll, 210.

<sup>iii</sup> H. A. Ironside, *1 and 2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1947, 2008), 177.