



ROSE
HILL
CHURCH

Philemon
Five Guys
“Living as God Intends”

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Palm Sunday

As we wrap up our series on the five shortest and generally most overlooked books of the New Testament, we turn today to Philemon. Before we read, let me give a little background. The Apostle Paul is the author, as we’ll see. He’s in prison, in Rome, because of his Jesus-centered ministry. There are two main characters in this letter. The first is Philemon, to whom Paul writes. He is a Christian in another town, probably Colossae. We have a letter, also from Paul, to the church in Colossae that we know as “Colossians.” Philemon’s house is the gathering for the church there. The second person is Onesimus. Onesimus is a slave who fled from Philemon’s household, ended up meeting with Paul (probably sought out Paul), and became a follower of Jesus. So, let’s dive into Philemon (**Philemon 1 here**) and see what we can learn from it for us today as we all follow Jesus together in 2024...

So, let’s get right to the reason for why Paul writes and what the whole purpose of this letter is for. We see in verse 10 that Onesimus has become a believer through Paul’s ministry even while he was in prison. Paul writes, **“I appeal to you for my child Onesimus, whose father I became during my imprisonment” (Philemon 1:10)**. Paul doesn’t mean he adopted Onesimus in a legal sense; rather, he means that Onesimus became a part of the family of God through faith in Jesus Christ, and Paul has played a parental role in that process as he mentored him. This is confirmed later in verse 16 when he writes, “He is very dear to me but even dearer to you, both as a fellow man and as a brother in the Lord.”

That’s what sets the stage for this letter. **Paul is making one request: that Philemon would welcome Onesimus back not as a slave, but as a brother in Christ – even as if he were Paul himself.** I know oftentimes people think the N.T. doesn’t speak strongly enough against the institution of slavery, and Scripture is sometimes criticized on this subject. But here, we see Paul’s heart in regards to this matter, as he asks Philemon to receive Onesimus back, not as a slave, but as a brother in Christ. While he could have worded it even more strongly, it’s nonetheless a strong plea for freedom and equality in Christ.

So, there are a couple things for us to glean from this letter; the first will be brief, and the second more in-depth, though they connect together. First is that: **Faith in Jesus Christ takes us from a place of uselessness to one of usefulness.** Paul writes that formerly, Onesimus was useless to Philemon. The irony here is that the name “Onesimus” means “useful.” And the reason he was formerly “useless” is because he wasn’t previously a follower of Jesus. Even though he presumably had worked hard in Philemon’s household, that is nothing compared to working hard for the Lord. The worldly profit, or benefit, he brought to Philemon, is nothing compared to the spiritual profit he has to offer now as a Christian.

You know, we might be working really hard on all kinds of things that have earthly usefulness and profitability – our careers, our homes, our vacation plans, our recreational endeavors, and so forth. We can be doing those things for ourselves, for our kids or grandkids or even generations beyond that. But compared to being profitable for Jesus Christ and his kingdom, and the generational impact that has on others, all those earthly profits amount to nothing. **If life feels unfulfilling, like you aren’t productive or useful in life, or that what you’re doing is all “for naught”...then following Jesus Christ can change all of that.** We don’t need a new job, a new spouse, a new car, a new television...no change in those kinds of places will give you a sense of true profitability and usefulness in this world. The only thing that will do that is a change in your spiritual condition, to follow Jesus Christ and be in relationship with him, to serve him, to work for him, to give your time and energy – and, yes, money – to him. As Jesus puts it: “Love the lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength...and love your neighbor as yourself.” So, we can live “Onesimus lives” – useful lives – for Christ and his kingdom, for God and others. Hold onto that one for a moment, and we’ll connect it to the second point.

There’s another thing from Onesimus’ life that we can learn from, and it is seen in the fact that he went back to Philemon: Running from our past sins and hurts prevents us from doing the hard work of reconciliation and getting healed; but true healing/reconciliation can’t come without that work. Onesimus stole from Philemon and then fled from him...and yet

now he is coming back to him, to make things right. One of the keys to living as God intends is to face the past and confess or forgive, or whatever is needed for healing to happen, rather than running from it. And this healing is not only between the two people, but also inside ourselves as well. We carry these things around with us when we don't reconcile and forgive.

So often, however, we run from the past, rather than facing it and seeking healing and wholeness. **And as long as we continue to run, those things will hold us down from living as God intends.** And so, like Onesimus, we have to go back and face those issues. It might mean asking for forgiveness, it might mean forgiving someone else, it might mean paying someone back for a wrong that we did to them or it might mean properly grieving pain and loss that we've experienced rather than stuffing it inside. This is the message of the cross, right? That God forgives us through Jesus and the cross of Christ. We can let the courage of Onesimus, as he goes back to Philemon as a brother in Christ...we can let him be an inspiration to us that we can do the same thing with God and with others in our lives as well. Let's rise above and have victory over the past so that we would, like him, be useful to God and His Kingdom.

Too frequently in the Church we have run from our sins and brokenness of the past, rather than acknowledging them and confessing them and rectifying them through forgiveness and healing. This includes the challenges we have still today in this country around the issue of race, which of course has its roots in our own nation's history of slavery. February was black history month here in America, and so this is something that's been on my heart lately, but today's message is the one that lent itself to this topic. Racial reconciliation has been difficult in our country, and some Christians have not seen all people as equally made in God's image and have not always applied Paul's counsel here to receive a brother or sister in the freedom of the Lord, so that healing and reconciliation might take place. In fact, just a few weeks ago, some comments were made by a well-known pastor in California about Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. (who did not live a perfect life, for sure) that were not helpful to racial reconciliation or the advancement of the gospel message. He said that MLK, Jr. was not a Christian. I have a problem

with that, and it is part of the reason today's message has gone in this direction.

Paul is seeking to bring healing into the relationship between Onesimus and Philemon, appealing to their common faith in Jesus. Onesimus appears to have stolen money from Philemon, before running away, but that doesn't prevent Paul from endorsing Onesimus as a Jesus follower. In fact, in verse 18, Paul offers to help rectify the situation and offers out of his own personal finances to repay Philemon if Onesimus isn't able to pay back what he took. Paul didn't need to do that, but he knows money can get in the way of healed relationships, and he doesn't want that to be an obstacle. Similarly, in the Church we have frequently run from our sins and brokenness of the past, rather than acknowledging them and confessing them and taking the necessary steps to rectify the situation through forgiveness and healing.

As a very small step in our policies and practice here at Rose Hill to demonstrate our commitment to racial equality, and to be useful in bringing healing to these relationships rather than running from the past: **Our Elders, this past summer, adopted the Juneteenth holiday as a paid holiday in our personnel policies.** Some of you might be shocked to hear this – I'm not sure where a lot of you are on this. Others of you are even more shocked that personnel policies are being discussed in a sermon 😅 ...but here you go. Evangelical Christians have, unfortunately, been seen as a stumbling block to racial healing in our country (such as the example I mentioned a moment ago), and this is one small way we can demonstrate our commitment to healing and reconciliation. As you may know, Juneteenth was adopted as a federal holiday in June of 2021, and approved by almost 97% of the members of congress (415-14). It was not a holiday pushed through by one party or the other. That bi-partisan support is almost unheard of today.

Juneteenth has not been celebrated or acknowledged widely until the last couple years. Perhaps its name has not helped. **The name combines "June" with "nineteenth" which is the date of the holiday, which does make the name a little odd.** In fact, the major concern for those 14 members of congress who voted against it was, in fact, the name, and not what the day stands for.¹ I will freely admit, the name of the holiday made *me* skeptical –

and I'm an adoptive father of two black kids – and even now I still find it a bit of an odd name. But, just as I wouldn't want someone to judge me because of anything on the surface about me – such as my name or my height or my hairline 😊 – I've realized I need not to judge this holiday based on its name. I'm actually ashamed that I judged this book by its cover for a couple years.

So, Juneteenth hasn't been widely acknowledged, but it has been a holiday celebrated in some places – such as Texas – since 1866. President Abraham Lincoln's *Emancipation Proclamation* was given on September 22, 1862, and was to take effect on January 1, 1863. **Galveston, Texas was the last place in the United States where the message arrived of freedom for slaves – the message reached there on June 19th of 1865.** It's hard for us to believe that it took two-and-a-half years from the effective date (let alone the proclamation date) for the message to make it everywhere (the news was blocked by some), because today an average citizen (let alone the President) could put something out on the Internet on Social Media, and it's possible that within a few hours or days, most everyone in the U.S. could have heard about it. And yet this message from President Lincoln took well over two years to make its way to everyone.

So, why endorse this holiday here at Rose Hill, and in our own lives? What about it can we affirm as Christians? There are at least three reasons. **First, it celebrates freedom, and Christ died to make us free.** For instance, we read in John 8:31-32, "...the truth will set you free;" Galatians is largely centered around this theme of freedom...plus the Exodus in the OT is all about the Israelites being freed from Egyptian slavery. And then, in today's passage, the entire purpose for this letter is Paul encouraging Philemon to receive Onesimus as more than a slave: as a fellow believer.

Second, it serves as a reminder to take the message of the gospel out to the "least of these" and to the ends of the earth. Two-and-a-half years after the Emancipation Proclamation, the word about freedom finally reached "all the world" (at least, all the USA) and not just some of it; and we can do the same with the gospel message. Jesus tells his disciples in Matthew 28 to take the teachings of Jesus out to the whole world, so as to make disciples far

and wide; in Acts, Jesus tells them to “go...to the ends of the earth.” Juneteenth reminds us to take this message of freedom through the cross of Christ everywhere.

Third, the first celebration in Galveston, TX was at a church! That’s where black folks went to celebrate their newly revealed freedom, and to give thanks and praise God for it. In fact, originally it was called “Jubilee Day” which is a direct reference to the Biblical year of Jubilee, which was all about release and freedom. So, the roots of this day are deep in the dirt of our faith. I would say it’s a more “Christian” holiday than any other federal holiday except Christmas – Labor Day, Memorial Day, Washington’s Birthday, New Year’s Day...and all the rest. None except this one and Christmas have a connection to Jesus (to the best of my knowledge).

So, celebrating, or at least acknowledging, Juneteenth is one way – a small one, admittedly – that we can acknowledge the pain of the past of our nation, and even the present where we judge people based on the color of their skin, and confess that Christians have not always been on the right side of this problem. The goal is to have a healthier future together, unified under the lordship of Jesus. **Juneteenth is a way we can celebrate that freedom really is for everyone. And isn’t that the message of the gospel: that we are free in Christ?** That we are not shackled by our sins, that we are not held back by our past, that when we confess our sin, God forgives us in Christ and we can be useful (we can be “Onesimuses”) for him and be in relationship with him now and on the other side of the grave – all because of what Jesus has done.

So, embracing Juneteenth is a small way that we can stand with black people, especially our Christian brothers and sisters in Christ – some of whom are also quite literally our sons and daughters – and let them know that we see them. We value them. We acknowledge the pain of the past that is part of their story even today, so we can help bring healing. **It’s what Paul urges Philemon to do with Onesimus: to welcome him, no longer as a slave but as a brother in Christ.** To welcome Onesimus as he would welcome Paul himself – which I think is maybe Paul’s strongest statement here, because Paul is no slave to Philemon, for sure. We can do the same with our brothers

and sisters in Christ regardless of their skin color. We can welcome them as if they were our own family and slowly change the perception about our faith in our neighborhoods. And like Onesimus, and his name, we can be useful for Jesus in this, living as God intends: taking the gospel message of “freedom from sin” out into the world and sharing it with others, regardless of skin color, so that all people would have the opportunity to be received in eternity as a brother or sister in Christ as well. Let’s pray...Amen.

¹ NPR article that talks about the 14 who voted against and why, including transcripts of what was said by some of them on the floor, during debate. <https://www.npr.org/2021/06/17/1007551309/14-house-republicans-voted-against-making-juneteenth-a-federal-holiday>