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Philemon 1-25

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1 Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother,

To Philemon our dear friend and fellow worker— **2** also to Apphia our sister and Archippus our fellow soldier—and to the church that meets in your home:

3 Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

4 I always thank my God as I remember you in my prayers, **5** because I hear about your love for all his holy people and your faith in the Lord Jesus. **6** I pray that your partnership with us in the faith may be effective in deepening your understanding of every good thing we share for the sake of Christ. **7** Your love has given me great joy and encouragement, because you, brother, have refreshed the hearts of the Lord's people.

8 Therefore, although in Christ I could be bold and order you to do what you ought to do, **9** yet I prefer to appeal to you on the basis of love. It is as none other than Paul—an old man and now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus— **10** that I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, who became my son while I was in chains. **11** Formerly he was useless to you, but now he has become useful both to you and to me.

12 I am sending him—who is my very heart—back to you. **13** I would have liked to keep him with me so that he could take your place in helping me while I am in chains for the gospel. **14** But I did not want to do anything without your consent, so that any favor you do would not seem forced but would be voluntary. **15** Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back forever— **16** no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother. He is very dear to me but even dearer to you, both as a fellow man and as a brother in the Lord.

17 So if you consider me a partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. **18** If he has done you any wrong or owes you anything, charge it to me. **19** I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand. I will pay it back—not to mention that you owe me your very self. **20** I do wish, brother, that I may have 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 ask.

22 And one thing more: Prepare a guest room for me, because I hope to be restored to you in answer to your prayers.

23 Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends you greetings. **24** And so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas and Luke, my fellow workers.

25 The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.

To have an appreciation for Paul's letter to Philemon—

And its rich message for us today—

We need to paint an accurate picture of Philemon...

Who he is and the position he's in...

Because he's in a position of power.

Slavery in the ancient Greco-Roman world is not like the slavery that comes to our mind:

Where hundreds of Africans are taken from their homes and loaded on ships in chains...

Taken to islands in the Caribbean and to the United States...

Bound to serve white slave owners merely because they are black...

Slavery based on a presumption of ethnic inferiority.

This is not what slavery in the ancient world was like.

There are a few ways you could have ended up as a slave in the Greco-Roman world (David deSilva):

You might have been a criminal...

You could have stolen goods or committed a crime and ended up working off your punishment.

Your side could have lost a war...

You fought a good fight but your group lost so now you become slaves of the victor.

Maybe you defaulted on debt...

You owed someone money or animals that you could not repay so you gave yourself into servitude.

Or you simply could have been born into a family of slaves...

Your dad was a slave so now you belong not to your dad, but to that slave owner.

As a slave you were at the complete mercy of your master.

You were their legal property and it was their right to do whatever they wanted with you...

You were subject to their authority and control.

And, as you'd expect, some masters were kind and some were cruel.

But if you ran away and were caught and sent back...

The punishment could be a severe beating or even execution.

Apparently Philemon's slave, Onesimus, left Philemon's house.

Maybe he was unhappy about the way he was being treated;

Maybe he wasn't satisfied with his tasks as a slave...

He thought there was something more to life out there for his skillset.

Or maybe he stole money from his master and escaped in the night.

We don't know the details surrounding his leaving...

All we know is that he left, and Philemon had every legal right to punish Onesimus.

So, Philemon is a slave owner...

This much we know.

We also know that he's a homeowner (v. 2).

There's a church that meets in his home...

So we assume that it's a rather sizable place.

Paul tells us that Philemon has also been hospitable to other believers...

Meaning that he's probably generous with his money.

So we know that Philemon has money to spare...

He has a large house and enough money to help support the local Christian community.

From all of this we can gather that Philemon is in a position of power.

One day Philemon receives this letter...

It's handed to him by his once-lost, now-found slave.

And Philemon is faced with a choice.

There is a play called *The Black Angel* that tells the story of a former Nazi SS officer, Engel. (this is told by Lewis Smedes in his book *How Can It Be All Right When Everything is All Wrong?*)

Engel was sentenced in the Nuremberg trials for his role in the massacre of a French village.

He spends a few decades in prison for his crimes and then after his release decides to settle in France.

Engel gets a place in the mountains with his wife wanting to live out the rest of his days in quiet and solitude...

Feeling guilty for his past...sorry for what he has done.

Another man, whose family was killed in the village massacre, has been waiting to get back at the officer.

He tracks down Engel after his release from prison and confronts him at his cabin...

He wants to talk to the former SS officer before he kills him...

Ask the man some questions before pronouncing his death sentence...

Making sure that no secrets are taken to the grave.

This man holds all of the power...

He is in a place to decide Engel's fate...

Whether he lives or dies...

And whether he's forgiven or not.

Philemon has a choice to make.

He holds Onesimus's fate in his hands.

Philemon holds the power in this situation.

And, like it or not, this is the same for many of us today too.

We are people of power.

No, we don't own slaves...

But many of us are in positions of power:

We hold power simply because of our gender.

Because some of us were born male, half of us automatically have an advantage over the other half of the population.

As a male there aren't barriers as to how high I can climb in my career;

I haven't been barred from holding certain leadership positions because of my gender;

I haven't had to fight for my right to enter the workforce...

Because I was born male I have standing in this world and in Canada.

Many of us hold power simply because of our skin color.

We get treated differently.

People tend to trust white people more up front.

We get better job opportunities.

We're less likely to be incarcerated or targets of discrimination.

And the same is true of our heritage...

You are especially in a position of "power" here at Trinity if you're Dutch...

I'm not saying this is bad or good...

Just stating the way it is.

We hold power.

And this power significantly influences our relationship and view of others without power.

Think about it...

You've been baptized and raised in this church or a church like it;

You went to the Christian school;

And competed on sports teams and extra-curriculars with many people here;

A majority of your family and extended family goes to Trinity;

Your last name sounds like those around you.

You're standing in the fellowship hall on a Sunday after worship talking to your friends or family.

There's also a young woman attending Trinity on this particular morning.

She's relatively new to the faith—

Christ has recently grabbed a hold of her life...

So she still has some questions...

But she mustered up the courage to find a local church.

Her family has been in Canada for as long as she knows...

Her last name is Williams.

She wants to know more about the church and what she heard during service but she's shy...

Well she's not really shy, she just doesn't feel comfortable approaching new people.

She'd be okay if someone came up to her and started talking.

Now, who holds the power here?

We do!

The answer is us!

We often decide the fate of those who walk through those doors.

We decide if they “fit” into our family.

We decide if they belong.

A lot of their growth and maturity as disciples first depends on what *we* do with *our* power!

In our reading today, Paul asks Philemon to give up his power...

“Give up your legal right to punish this man Onesimus;”

“Give up your legal right to view him as a slave;”

“Give up your rights and accept him as a brother.”

Paul is able to ask this because Onesimus has been transformed...

God has done a work in Onesimus’ life.

Paul doesn’t just think Onesimus is a friendly guy...

Or a good man now...worthy of his keep...so “accept him.”

Paul declares that this man is now a brother...

His status has been changed, his identity has been changed.

“Receive him no longer as a slave, but as a *beloved* brother.”

The Gospel message of the Lord Jesus has touched Onesimus and now Onesimus is a new man.

In Christ Onesimus is a new creation. (2 Cor 5:17)

Paul is moving this relationship to a new level...

This relationship of unequal power.

Asking that they no longer relate as master and slave...

But as brothers...

As equals in the Lord.

Those whom the Lord calls to himself are a part of a new family.

We see it in Paul’s use of familial language:

“Timothy our *brother*...”

“Apphia our *sister*...”

“God our *Father*...”

“Because you, *brother*...”

“My *son* Onesimus...”

“Count him as a dear *brother*.”

In Christ, Philemon and Onesimus are now family...

Society may tell them that they're worlds apart—

That one holds all of the power and the other holds no power—

But the Gospel levels the playing field.

See, every person comes to Christ in the same condition:

Every person comes before God wearing torn rags...

Garments stained with sin.

Every person comes to God in need...

No one comes from a place of power.

We all come in weakness.

It could be the world's richest, white CEO...

And the world's poorest Native woman...

Or it could be a wealthy slave owner in the 1st century;

And his runaway slave;

All come to the Lord as sinners in need of his grace and mercy.

No one comes with anything to offer.

We all come on our knees looking for his love.

And in his mercy our Gracious Father lifts us up.

He takes our sin, guilt, and shame upon himself and lifts us up.

He calls us his own and he makes us a part of his family.

So that's where we're at now.

We've been adopted by God and welcomed into his family.

And he's redefined the word "family" for us.

No longer is it mom and dad, brother and sister, aunt and uncle;

No longer is it the people who look like us;

And the people who talk like us;

No longer is it always the people whom we feel most comfortable around;

Or who have similar interests;

God sees past the divisions created and emphasized by the world...

And he sees those in Christ as his children.

All of those in Christ are now a part of the same family...

We are all brothers and sisters.

I wish I could tell you that the story of the former SS officer had a redemptive ending...

But the man couldn't accept Engel.

He didn't belong her because of what he'd done.

He wasn't willing to see his brokenness...

Wasn't able to see that they were much the same.

And so Engel is killed.

The man incited the townspeople...

Riled them up—

So they came to his cabin and killed him.

And so now that power that has been given to us—

Whether by birth, chance, or hard work—

Our power is no longer to be used to create division...

Or to build walls to keep out those who "don't belong..."

Or to keep us away from those we don't feel comfortable with.

That power now is to be used for their benefit.

Just as Christ did for us...

We lay down our power so that others might have life.

Even though we have every right to talk with our friends and family after church in the fellowship hall...

Even though we have every right as Canadians to be comfortable...

We lay down this right for the sake of our brothers and sisters in Christ.

We step away from our friends or blood family to talk to the new person who doesn't have family here, who isn't Dutch, and is new to the faith;

Or at work or school we risk our reputation and surrender our power welcoming those without power...

Giving a voice and being a friend to those in need.

Or we give up a night with family and friends to welcome our new neighbors to the apartments...many of whom are our brothers and sisters in Christ;

Or we spend time with our brothers and sisters who live alone at the Emmanuel Home.

In Christ we are all family.

When the Holy Spirit grabs a hold of someone's life...

It transforms them from who they used to be into God's beloved child...

We become one family.

May we know how much God loves us as his children...

May we share this love with those in his family...

And may we proclaim it to those yet to be called into the fold.

Amen.