

Text: Philemon 1-7 (Pew Bible pg.1183)

Title: “Redeeming Relationships”

INTRODUCTION

Let’s open our Bibles and find the little book of Philemon in the New Testament. It’s amazing that a letter that one might read in a couple of minutes can be so rich that we can talk about it for weeks. That’s the nature of God’s Word. Maybe you are familiar with the book of Colossians. It’s one of the better known letters of the Apostle Paul in the New Testament. Well many don’t realize that there was actually a second letter addressed to believers in Colossae. It’s called Philemon. Let’s get started by reading vv.1-7.

I’ve entitled this series of messages “Redeeming Relationships.” Relationships are so important in our walk with God ... at home, at church, and in the community.

ILLUSTRATION – I was thinking about this as we watched the opening ceremonies of the Olympics a couple of weekends ago. I thought about how great it must have felt as the USA Olympic team marched in together under the flag of our nation. **SHOW USA PHOTO.** What a great feeling it must have been to know that you were part of a great team of people. And it was the same for every nation represented. So much so that there was one young lady who did something pretty bold. **SHOW INDIA PHOTO.** I didn’t notice this when we were watching the opening ceremonies, but I do remember the India team marching in. Do you notice something odd here? What about this gal walking at the front of the group? She’s obviously enjoying herself. The thing is that she is not part of the team. Officials later said that she was one of the thousands of volunteers who helped with the opening ceremonies, but she’s not an athlete or a coach. She just wanted to belong ... to be on the team ... and so she just jumped in.

Relationships are important to all of us, particularly in the church, and that’s what we find in the book of Philemon.

Now there’s a back story to this letter. Paul is in prison writing a letter to an esteemed member of the church in Colossae by the name of Philemon. Paul never visited Colossae in person, but it may be that Paul met Philemon in the nearby city of Ephesus, led him to Christ, then sent him to start a church in his hometown of Colossae. That may be the way the relationship began. I say Philemon is an esteemed man because the church actually meets in his home.

So Paul is 1100 miles away in Rome writing to Philemon. Perhaps seated next to Paul as he writes is a man by the name of Onesimus. We’ll be introduced to Onesimus later in the book of Philemon, but he’s really the main reason Paul is writing the letter to Philemon. You see, Onesimus is a runaway slave who belonged to Philemon. That’s right! The man in whose home the church is meeting, a leading man in the church, owned at least one slave. Slavery was an established and accepted part of the world in which the NT takes place. Maybe we’ll have a little time to unpack in a later message. But this wasn’t really about a slave being returned to his master. It’s about two men begin reconciled in their relationship. And Paul is the middleman.

The book of Philemon is filled with redeeming relationships. Paul had helped both Philemon and Onesimus experience redemption through the Lord Jesus Christ. Now Paul was intent on helping Philemon and Onesimus be reconciled in their relationship with each other ... redeeming that relationship. This is also about Onesimus being redeemed as a useful servant to Philemon. Just to show you where this is going, down in v.18 Paul says to Philemon, “if he (Onesimus) owes you anything, charge it to me.” That’s exactly what redemption is ... the payment of a price to set a slave free.

That’s what Christ did for us when He came and died for our sins. He redeemed us through His blood ... He purchased us off of the slave market of sin ... He paid our sin debt in full. And the love that Jesus Christ showed us in redemption is the basis for the love we are to show others.

If we are going to be part of redeeming, redemptive relationships we have to know who we are. And here in these first few verses of Philemon there are several words that show the ways that we relate to one another based upon who we are in Christ. Let’s just look at them one at a time.

1. PRISONERS OF JESUS CHRIST

Philemon 1 - Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus,

I mentioned earlier that Paul is writing probably from a prison in Rome. From this same prison he would write the Philippians, Ephesians, and Colossians.

ILLUSTRATION – If you’ve ever read *Pilgrim’s Progress* by John Bunyan you may know that it was written from an English jail. Isn’t it amazing what great things can come from times that seem to be a prison? It was the same way with Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German pastor who inspired so many from a Nazi prison during WWII.

Notice that Paul didn’t say he’s a prisoner of Rome, or of Caesar. Why? Maybe there are a couple of reasons. It may be that Paul was affirming his primary allegiance to Jesus Christ. Christ had “arrested” or “captured” Paul when he was saved on the Road to Damascus. And ever since that day Paul was a “prisoner” of Jesus. What an amazing way to look at our life in Christ ... a prisoner, not in a bad way, but rather we were captured by His love.

But I believe the main reason Paul identifies himself as a “prisoner” of Jesus Christ has to do with the fact that he is a prisoner in a Roman jail, but he is not there primarily because Caesar put him there. He was in prison because Christ, in His sovereignty, positioned Paul in that situation to glorify Christ and to serve His purposes.

It was from this same prison that Paul wrote to the believers in Philippi. He knew they were concerned about him. But he writes not as a man hopelessly rotting away in a prison, but as a man with a purpose in prison. Listen to what he says:

Philippians 1:12 - Now I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel.

Philippians 1:13 - As a result, it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ.

Philippians 1:14 - Because of my chains, most of the brothers in the Lord have been encouraged to speak the word of God more courageously and fearlessly.

Do you see what's happening? Paul said, "Don't worry about me here. God is working. I'm a prisoner here because of Jesus Christ. He is working through me. I have a captive audience! I can't go anywhere, but neither can they. These soldiers who are stationed to guard me can't go anywhere. They have to listen to me talk about Jesus."

I think about Paul years before when he and Silas were in the prison in Philippi. Were they bummed about it? No; they sang praises at midnight. They could praise God because they knew that this situation was dark, but it wasn't hopeless. They were prisoners of Christ.

This shows the sovereignty of God over our lives. I'm not a prisoner to cancer; I'm a prisoner of Jesus Christ. I'm not a prisoner to a terrible marriage; I'm a prisoner of Jesus Christ. I'm not a prisoner of a boring job; I'm a prisoner of Jesus Christ. I'm not a prisoner to the preschoolers that cling to me every minute of the day; I'm a prisoner of Jesus Christ. He has a purpose for me in all of this. I can praise Him.

There's another way we are to see ourselves...

2. BROTHERS AND SISTERS

Philemon 1 - Timothy our brother

The first verse tells us that at Paul's side is his faithful colleague in ministry Timothy. He refers to him as a "brother." Now Timothy's not his blood brother, but that's a common biblical way to refer to fellow believers. Down in v.2 Paul mentions...

Philemon 2 - to Apphia (ap-FEE-a) our sister

Most scholars believe that Apphia is Philemon's wife. She too is a sister in Christ.

What a wonderful way to we refer to one another in the family of God ... brothers and sisters. We are family; we have the same heavenly Father. There's a connection that we have with other believers that we don't have with people who are not believers.

And it causes us to treat one another differently.

1 Peter 3:8 - Finally, all of you, live in harmony with one another; be sympathetic, love as brothers, be compassionate and humble.

ILLUSTRATION – One of our ladies was telling me about a funeral she and her husband attended for a relative in their family. She shared of how awkward it was because there were two sisters in this family who would not speak to each other at their brother’s funeral. That’s a heart-breaking thing when it happens in families, but it’s an even greater heartache when it happens in the family of God. Again the main point of this little letter is Paul’s efforts to get two brothers on speaking terms once again. Part of the motivation is that we are brothers and sisters in Christ. We have a common heavenly Father, who delights when His children live together in love and harmony.

But then there’s another way we should see ourselves ...

3. DEAR FRIENDS

Paul refers to Philemon as “our dear friend” (v.1). Let me spend a little time with Philemon since the book is a letter to him from Paul.

As I said earlier, Philemon is most likely a prominent man in Colossae. He and Paul met when Paul came to the nearby city of Ephesus on one of his missionary journeys. Paul helped Philemon come to Christ. Then Philemon went back to Colossae where he started a church in his home. We’ll see in a minute that the church in Colossae meets in his home. Being relatively wealthy Philemon has a slave by the name of Onesimus who runs away to Rome where, by the providence of God, he meets Paul. And Paul leads him to Christ. But Onesimus has wronged Philemon, and Paul wants to help them be reconciled. And he writes this letter to Philemon, his “dear friend,” or “beloved one.” And Paul is putting his friendship on the line by asking Philemon to do something extraordinary in forgiving his new friend Onesimus. We need friends like that.

Proverbs 18:24 - A man of many companions may come to ruin, but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother.

Paul says that Philemon is not only a “dear friend” but also a...

4. FELLOW WORKERS

Philemon 1 - To Philemon our ... fellow worker,

That’s another way we are to see ourselves and other believers ... prisoners of Christ, brothers and sisters, dear friends and fellow workers.

This is not just a “worker.” There’s a little prefix on the front of this word in the Greek that means a “with-worker” ... a co-worker or co-laborer. And Paul has in mind all that Philemon has done to advance the Gospel and to love the believers in Colossae by serving them. Notice...

Philemon 5 - because I hear about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints.

Philemon 6 - I pray that you may be active in sharing your faith, so that you will have a full understanding of every good thing we have in Christ.

Philemon 7 - Your love has given me great joy and encouragement, because you, brother, have refreshed the hearts of the saints.

There's a special joy that comes from serving and refreshing others ... when you get outside of yourself and give yourself away in service to others. And that joy is even more special when you do it alongside others.

ILLUSTRATION – Over the past couple of weekends there's been a great group of volunteers working on the building where our new Mercy Clinic will be located. We were talking about this yesterday. There's a special bond when you sweat and labor alongside someone else.

But there's another way we should see ourselves and other believers...

5. FELLOW SOLDIERS

Philemon 2 - to Archippus (AR-khip-pos) our fellow soldier

Archippus may have been the son of Philemon and Apphia, and possibly the pastor of the church in Colossae that met in Philemon's home.

Again, he's referred to not just as a soldier, but a "fellow soldier." There's that same little prefix in front of the word for "soldier" that means "with."

They are not soldiers fighting for Rome, or for some resistance movement against Rome. They are fellow soldiers of the Cross of Jesus Christ. They endured the hardships of ministry together. They struggled for the sake of Gospel together.

I'm reminded that one of the best ways we can be fellow-strugglers is in praying for one another.

Romans 15:30b - Join me in my struggle by praying to God for me.

You know, carrying a heavy load alone ... fighting a fierce battle alone ... can be one of the most discouraging and depressing things imaginable. One of the great things that happens in the Body of Christ is that we bear one another's burdens. We fight the Enemy side by side. We soldier together.

So we should see ourselves as prisoners of Jesus Christ, brothers and sisters, dear friends, fellow workers, fellow soldiers ... and we should also see ourselves as...

6. THE CHURCH

Philemon 2 - to the church that meets in your home:

As I said earlier the church in Colossae met in Philemon's home, which was pretty typical in NT times. If they didn't meet in a home, they might meet outdoors or in a rented hall. Church buildings like we know them today didn't come along for another two hundred years or so. The church in

Colossae was a house church, like we find in many places in India and in other parts of the world where we are involved in missions.

But the church isn't the building; it's the group of people who happen to meet in a building, whether it's a house or a great sanctuary like we enjoy.

ILLUSTRATION – Some of you remember the little rhyme with the hand motions: “This is the church; here is the steeple. Open the doors and there's all the people.” Well the building is not the church. It's the people inside, or wherever they are, that is the church.

The word “church” means ones who have been called out into a community. When we are called to Christ we are called into a community of believers. We are placed in the church and God wants us to grow and serve in that community. When that word is used in NT times it was always used to describe an assembly of people who are members. When Christ saves you he places you in His body, and He wants you to commit your life to a local church. That's why membership is important. That's why each Sunday we invite people to come to Christ and to officially join the church.

CONCLUSION

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

We so often skip over the greetings like this as if they were just perfunctory. There is no perfunctory word in your Bible. It's all there for a reason.

Grace = the activity of God ... the means of salvation

Peace = the result of God's activity in our lives

This is more than a greeting. It's an invitation to enter the grace and peace of the God.