

Philemon: A Portrait of Gospel Partnership

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Over the last few weeks I have had the joy of studying and teaching through Paul's epistle to Philemon.

This shortest of all Paul's epistles was written during his first Roman imprisonment to mediate reconciliation between the runaway slave Onesimus and his owner Philemon. But more than that, Paul authors an incredibly vivid portrait of partnership and fellowship in the gospel.

Here are four ways to consider gospel partnership from the book of Philemon:

1. Gospel transformation results in gospel partnership.

Philemon had faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, and from that source flowed his love and care for his brothers and sisters in the Colossian church. Onesimus is also transformed by the gospel. No longer is he useless, but he is useful. After coming to faith in Christ he began serving the gospel alongside Paul in Rome.

2. Gospel partners live and breathe for Christ and the gospel.

The gospel gives new identity and purpose. The gospel creates a family of beloved brothers and sisters together in Christ, and for Christ. Look at the family language throughout this letter (vv. 1, 2, 7, 10, 16, 20).

Paul repeatedly emphasizes that his purpose and motivation is Christ. He was imprisoned for Christ (vv. 1, 9). He prayed for Philemon's effectiveness in knowledge and good works for the sake of Christ (v. 6). He requested the release and return of Onesimus so that he might assist him in the work of the gospel (v. 13). Christ and the gospel has become Paul's chief motive.

3. Gospel partners gladly embrace the work, cost, sacrifice, and blessing of partnership in the ministry of the gospel.

They are together for Christ and the gospel, and they are described as partners, fellow-workers, fellow-soldiers, and fellow-prisoners.

In Rome: Paul's personal ministry team included Timothy, Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke as they work to support and extend Paul's ministry far beyond the walls of his imprisonment (vv. 1, 24). This is the ministry team Paul wishes for Onesimus to join.

In Colosse: Philemon, Apphia, and Archippus host the Colossian church in their home. They have committed to use their resources and possessions for the gospel, and their ministry extends beyond physical hospitality as they refresh the hearts of the saints.

In Philemon we observe the close bonds of partnership within the local church, and in the missionary work of the first century. Paul is fully confident of Philemon's continued partnership, generosity, and reception of Onesimus, and of future hospitality upon his release.

4. The work of gospel ministry is gently aimed at the heart. Gospel ministry does not wield authority to shape behaviors, but appeals to the heart from which behaviors flow.

Paul and Philemon directed their ministry to the hearts of others. Philemon refreshed the hearts of the saints (v. 7) , and we observe Paul's care for the heart of Philemon in the midst of his request (vv. 8-9).

Notice how Paul does not demand obedience from his position as an apostle, but instead he chooses to appeal to Philemon's heart for the sake of love. This echoes his 1 Thessalonians 2:6-7 refusal to make apostolic demands, and his example of coming alongside his brothers and sisters with gentleness.

Paul will not retain Onesimus as a minister partner without Philemon's permission, because he would not have service from Philemon without it coming from his heart. Philemon's "goodness" must not be by compulsion, but of his own accord (v. 14).

In Colossians 3:22-23 (Paul's other epistle to the Colossian church), we see this theme echoed again as Paul writes to slaves and their masters. Rather than serve with reluctant obedience, work must be done with sincerity of heart as to the Lord. Work must not be done out of fear of man, but from the heart and for Christ Jesus. Gospel leadership will not seek service to men, but service to the Lord. Gospel leadership does not seek to transform behaviors, but ministers to the heart from which our actions flow.

Consider Your Partnership in the Gospel

There is much more wealth to be unpacked from this short epistle. I encourage you to continue to engage the text and consider how you are currently partnering in the gospel with your church family.

- What does it look like to refresh the hearts of your brothers and sisters?
- How are you using your home for sake of the gospel?
- How might you embrace gospel partnership with your church family?
- How might your church embrace gospel partnership with missionaries around the world?
- Are you applying the gospel to the heart in your discipleship of others?

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