



# New Day Church

Need a fresh start?

## **POUNDING IT OUT** **Philemon's lessons on life-shaped faith**

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My father-in-law recently got a car that has a continuous transmission. Have you ever driven one of those? You never know when it's switching gears, because it's just one long smooth transition. That's not the way I drive. Give me a stick shift where I can let everyone in the car know exactly when we're going from 1<sup>st</sup> to 2<sup>nd</sup> by the choppy way I work the clutch. There's never a question of what's going on in my car.

We are switching gears this morning. Given how seamless my transitions normally are, you may or may not have realized it without my calling attention to it. But there are different types of sermons, and we're moving from one type to another today. Some are topical, like the series we just did on the church, or the one we did about family dynamics. Some are life studies, such as the ones we've done on Gideon and Joseph. I like preaching those kinds of sermons. We can talk about specific things that are very relevant to life. But I also like another type of sermon series, which is studying an individual book of the Bible. I think it is important to look at a book as a unit by itself to get a sense of the big picture. With topical studies you jump around more and may or may not walk away with a more complete understanding of one particular book.

A series on a book of the Bible is a great opportunity to become more familiar with your own Bible as well. Even though we project the passages that we read, I would encourage you to follow along in your own Bible to get used to finding your way around. And since we're sticking mostly with a single text, it's easier than when we're jumping from one place to another. If you don't have a Bible and you need one, the church has some great study Bibles available in the translation we use most of the time, and we'd be happy to give you one to keep.

That having been said, over the next two Sundays, we're going to look at a personal letter the apostle Paul wrote to a man named Philemon. It's one of the shortest books of the Bible: In the original language, Paul's letter to Philemon is only 335 words long.

In spite of being so short, the letter packs a punch. There's a lot happening in that little bit of space, and we're going to unpack it over the next two weeks.

Let's start with some background information about Philemon. Philemon lived in the city of Colosse, which was in present-day Turkey. He most likely met Paul when Paul traveled through the nearby town of Ephesus, and he became a Christian.

From the little we know, we can guess that Philemon probably was somewhat well off. He had slaves and a house big enough for a church to meet in. So he was most likely a man of some influence.

But here's what happened: One of Philemon's slaves by the name of Onesimus ran away. According to Roman law, that meant he could be executed if he was caught. Somehow or other, he bumped into Paul, and became a Christian under his influence.

This created a dilemma for Paul, Onesimus and Philemon. What was the right thing to do?

What makes the situation complicated is that we're talking about a society in which slavery was completely ingrained in the economy. One commentator I read said that challenging slavery in the Roman world would be somewhat like challenging the mortgage system in our day. Not too many people would take you seriously. And Paul doesn't call for an overthrow of the system, although in another letter he does mention slave traders in a whole list of sins that he saw as being incompatible with Christian teaching.

So since there's a fundamental flaw in the system that created the rules for slaves, what should be done in the situation? How does a Christian function in a corrupt world? Should Paul report an escaped slave and be a good law abiding citizen, or would he be sending a Christian brother to his death? Should Onesimus put his past behind him or risk going back to make things right, now that he was trying to follow Jesus? And how should Philemon respond to both Paul and Onesimus?

That's what Paul talks about in this little letter, and it is why I think the book of Philemon is so important for us today. Paul didn't just write some religious ideas off in a corner. He's not spouting pure theory. He gets into the messiness of real life and talks about how faith should apply to a difficult situation.

I heard an interview on the radio this week with Chris Martin, the lead singer from the band Cold Play. He was talking about the band's sudden celebrity and trying to stay normal, especially when he's married to a celebrity actress and always around stars. He said "You have to stay connected to reality. You have to stay normal. You can't pretend you're from another planet."

In a completely different sense, Christians have to find a way to stay connected to reality. We can't have a Sunday morning faith that has nothing to do with how we live on Thursday afternoon. And that's hard work. That's why I liked the picture of the guy hammering on the anvil. It's about faith being pounded out into the shape of our lives.

So Paul's letter to Philemon is an excellent little case study in how to live out what we believe in the face of sticky, messy situations.

That's our setup for the next two weeks. We're going to divide the letter into two parts: This morning we'll look at the first section, and next Sunday we'll get into the second half.

### **Philemon 1-7**

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

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

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

*I always thank my God as I remember you in my prayers, because I hear about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints. 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. Your love has given me great joy and encouragement, because you, brother, have refreshed the hearts of the saints.*

A lot of people were happy when DVDs came out because you no longer have to sit through previews. You can jump right to the main feature with the press of a button. After hearing those opening verses of this letter, some of you may be wanting to press the button. You might be saying, "Get on with it. Enough introductions. Jump to the main story."

It's true that Paul doesn't even mention Onesimus or slavery in these verses. But there's more going on here than just a polite opening paragraph. Already Paul is introducing themes and concepts that have to do with integrating faith into our lives.

Look at the opening lines again:

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

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

In a very simple way here, Paul shows us that one of the first things we need to do when we're wanting to apply what we believe is to

### **Reframe our identity.**

We talked about messy situations, and really, Onesimus isn't the only person facing one. Look at Paul – He's sitting in a jail cell in Rome. He was imprisoned several times

throughout his life, sometimes beaten, sometimes put in stocks and chains. It was not a pleasant situation.

If I were in that situation and I had a chance to write a note to somebody, I think mine would probably say, “You’ve got to help me. I’m being held prisoner by the Roman government and I didn’t do anything wrong.”

But what does Paul say? “Paul, a prisoner of Christ.” This is the only letter where he introduces himself in that way. He has reframed his imprisonment in light of a bigger purpose. While other people would only see how confining a prison cell was, Paul had faith that God has complete control of the ugly circumstances.

From our vantage point, we can see just how true that was and how jail time served God’s purpose. Paul wrote at least half of his letters, if not more, while he was in prison. That seemed to be the only way God could slow him down long enough to write. And Paul’s letters make up nearly half of our New Testament. He wasn’t just a prisoner of Caesar, he was Christ’s prisoner, there to do the job Christ had for him as long as he was in jail. At least twice, Paul had the opportunity to try and orchestrate his own release, but he didn’t, because he knew that the circumstances weren’t holding God back. His job wasn’t to spend all his energies complaining or wishing for a better life.

I’ve been there before, where all I can see is how desperately I want to be somewhere else. My first couple years at my current job at the ad agency were very rough, and I did everything I could think of to find something else. God finally dealt with me and said, “I want you here for a reason.” Now, some 14 years later, I can see why. My job as creative director has ended up being key in how we were able to plant this church. I couldn’t have pastored on the side if I had a lot of other jobs. And I wouldn’t have learned the skills there that have proven so helpful for starting a church. And I wouldn’t have had the interactions with the people God has placed in my path there. I needed to learn that I was Christ’s creative director, not just Brandner Communications’ creative director.

My dad grew up on an asparagus farm, and in the summers while other kids would be taking it easy and going swimming, my dad had to work all by himself out in the fields. It was a lot of hours alone that could have been torture. But my dad reframed it into a chance to have long conversations with God, and to this day he would point to that time as turning out to be critical in his relationship with God. He was a farmhand for Christ.

You are Christ’s engineer not just Boeing’s., If you’re a teacher, you’re Christ’s teacher, not just the school district’s. You’re Christ’s busdriver – not just Metro’s. There is a will for your life that is bigger than your employer’s.

Christ himself modeled this attitude. When he knew he was headed for the cross, his prayer to his Father was, “I don’t want to drink this cup. I would rather not have this job. But this isn’t about what I want. It’s about your will. And that’s what I want to see happen more than anything.” He knew who he was.

We can either decide what we believe about God based on our circumstances, or we can base what we think about our circumstances on what we believe about God. It is a reframing or a rethinking of how we see ourselves. And Paul didn't just stop at how he viewed himself. Every person he addresses in the letter he speaks to in light of a role that points out the significance of their place in Christ's work. Timothy our brother. Philemon our dear friend and co-worker. Apphia our sister. Archippus our fellow soldier. He infused every relationship with meaning and encouraged each of the other Christians in their faith at the same time.

If we're serious about bringing our beliefs to bear on our tough life situations it will involve reframing our identity so that we first and foremost see ourselves as Christ's, no matter what situation we find ourselves in.

A second concept Paul demonstrates is

### **Remembering our fellow pilgrims**

*I always thank my God as I remember you in my prayers, because I hear about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints.*

If there is one thing Paul did well, it was remembering to pray for people. It's a classic Paul line. In most of his letters, he starts off by telling whoever he is writing to, "I always thank God for you when I'm praying." That is what he did. He kept people constantly before the Lord in prayer. As I said last week, I hope you will take advantage of those prayer reminder cards to keep bringing our church to the Lord.

My Grandma and Grandpa Cole would pray for me every day. They would sit down together at the breakfast table and get to work. Not only me – they prayed for all their kids and grandkids and great grandkids. And each of us knew that they were doing that. They were devoted to remembering everyone. It was a huge gift they gave the family.

Part of why it is so powerful is because it's a picture of what Christ himself does for us.

### **Romans 8:34-35**

*Christ Jesus, who died -- more than that, who was raised to life -- is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us.*

Jesus has taken up our cause and is interceding to God on our behalf. Hallelujah! The one who is called Faithful and True will never forget to pray for me.

I don't know about you, but I'm not very good at that kind of consistency. Prayer is hard work for me and I tend to let people slip my mind except when there is a crisis going on. And yet remembering to pray for one another is one of the ways that we as the body of Christ participate in his work and provide a real-life reminder to each other of what Jesus is doing for us.

Sometimes my prayers for people are thinly disguised prayers AT people. Do you know what I mean? “Lord, please help them to change.” “God, give them wisdom to make the right decision (meaning the decision I think they should make).”

Paul starts his prayer off not FOR Philemon or AT Philemon but BECAUSE OF Philemon. Paul thanks God because of what Philemon has done and how God created him.

That’s a vital component in remembering each other in prayer, precisely because of what we’re talking about this morning. Paul is going to be addressing a messy issue that involves Philemon. It could get ugly. Paul could get bossy and self-righteous with him. But that’s harder to do when he starts off thanking God for Philemon and all his good qualities. That sets the tone for the discussion that follows.

Most of the difficult situations we go through in life involve other people and our relationships with them. If we begin dealing with the circumstances by “always giving thanks” for the other person first, we will be in a better position to dialogue with them, because we’ll have better perspective on who they are as a person. It’s harder to be unreasonably angry with somebody you just thanked God for.

Paul goes beyond thanking God for Philemon to presenting a specific request for him.

*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.*

Paul believed a vital component of applying our beliefs to our lives involves

### **Releasing our faith**

When you hear those words “be active in sharing your faith,” what comes to mind? Fingernails on a chalkboard? A knot in your stomach?

Most of us are uncomfortable with sharing our faith on multiple levels. We feel like we don’t know what to say. We are afraid somebody will get mad at us or not be friends with us anymore. And quite frankly, we’re not really sure how legitimate of an activity it is. I was just talking with somebody this week about whether or not it’s right to push Christianity at people who have another religion already. Sharing our faith feels like it goes against everything we’re taught about accepting other people the way they are, as if we’re trying to change them.

Can you relate to those feelings? They’re totally valid. Author Rebecca Manley Pippert put it well. She said:

Christians and Non-Christians have something in common. We’re both uptight about evangelism. Our fear as Christians seems to be, “How many people did I offend this

week?” We think that we must be a little obnoxious in order to be good evangelists. A tension builds inside: Should I be sensitive to people and forget about evangelism, or should I blast them with the gospel and forget about their dignity as human beings? Many Christians choose to be aware of the other person but then feel defensive and guilty for not evangelizing.”

She tells a story in the book from before she was a Christian. Someone came up to talk to her who was all anxious and impatient with a scowl on his face. He sounded angry. And then he told her God loved her. And it left her bewildered, wondering, “If God’s so good and loving, what is this guy’s problem?”

This is not what Paul had in mind when he prayed that Philemon would be “active in sharing his faith.” It should not be a frightening process (for either person). The word is sharing. Not blaring or glaring or scaring.

Paul’s sentence there is complex in the Greek and translators have struggled to do it justice, but the word he uses isn’t the word for preaching or talking – it’s the word for fellowship and sharing something in common with others. That’s a much different way to think about sharing our faith. It’s about cultivating a generous spirit that recognizes a cry for help and offers Jesus as the one who answers those cries. To share anything implies that I have more than I need, and I’m willing to give it away to somebody who could really use it. It’s not about trying to force conversations with people who don’t want to hear what I’m saying.

That’s why I thought releasing our faith might be a better word choice for us this morning. The more we learn about Christ, the more our faith is going to just naturally spill over into every area of our life. As we see God do spectacular things in our life, we can’t hog it all to ourselves. We share out of our experience and hopefully it touches somebody who needs to hear that God still works in people’s lives. We lend our faith to people who don’t have strength to have any of their own.

Part of integrating our faith into life is not trying to contain it to just one area or prevent other people from seeing it. Let it be what it is. Don’t bottle it up – let it flow where it naturally wants to.

Bill Hybels is the pastor of Willow Creek Church in Chicago, and he tells the story of going to work out at this club that had recently hired an intern who was from India. Bill noticed that nobody at the gym was giving him the time of day, probably because he didn’t speak English very well. So Bill struck up the beginnings of a friendship with him. He found out the man was a Muslim. He gave the man a Bible, and the man gave him a copy of the Koran.

One day, Bill was getting dressed to go running, when the man came in and said, “Mr. Bill something terrible has happened. My wife just left me. I’m all alone. I don’t know what I’m going to do.”

Bill could sense his pain and really felt like God was telling him he should put his arm around the man and give him a hug. But everything inside him wanted to shut off that idea. Bill isn't very demonstrative so that felt awkward, not to mention the fact that it was another guy and here Bill was not even fully dressed yet. It all seemed wrong. But he could hear the Holy Spirit telling him, "I want this man to know in the middle of his pain that he matters to the true God. I'm just looking for one of my children to communicate that to him. Will you do it for me?"

As soon as he gave in and put his arm around the man, the man just melted and flooded Bill's shoulder with tears. It was exactly what he needed at that moment.

Are we willing to be generous with our faith? Paul says when we do that, we not only meet the needs of others -- we also learn for ourselves that there are more depths to Christ than we ever realized.

Paul ends this section with one final comment about Philemon:

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

I just really like that line. "You, brother, have refreshed the hearts of the saints." When Paul speaks of the saints, he's speaking of everyone who believes in Jesus – not the saints like you see statues of. Philemon had refreshed the hearts of people in his church. That's the last point I want to draw out of this introduction – the need to be refreshing our hearts.

### **Refreshing our hearts**

The word there for refresh means this:

*To cause or permit one to cease from any movement or labor in order to recover and collect his strength to give rest.*

What a great compliment for Philemon. His interactions with people were the kind that left them breathing easier, feeling calm and rejuvenated.

Paul saw that as a really important component of Philemon's ministry. So much of the time we focus on our need to challenge people, to hold them accountable, to help them mature. All the talk about pounding out our faith in life's difficulties can leave you feeling ground down to a worn-out stub. And then in the middle of it all, we find this quiet oasis.

In one sentence, Paul affirms the need to refresh each other, and he also validates our need to be refreshed. It is okay to say "I'm tired. I can't give anymore." There is a time to pause and catch our breath. We can't refresh others if we aren't feeling refreshed ourselves. If we're burning ourselves out, we won't have anything to give.

Jesus was the one who said these words:

**Matthew 11:28-30**

*"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."*

Jesus himself is our rest. We have been given the charge of living out examples of that for each other, giving each other permission to rest and finding ways to refresh each other and ease the burdens.

What does that look like? It can be completely literal and practical. Last year, when I was really slammed with a lot of work, John Hale and Dan Peek showed up at our door and aerated our lawn, because they knew I didn't have the time to do it. That was refreshing.

For some, it might mean choosing to offer forgiveness easily and completely. For yourself it could mean learning to trust God's grace more than the voice of guilt in your head that says you haven't done enough.

There is no reason to apologize for needing rest. Take Jesus up on his offer and stay under his yoke that is easy and light. Let's be people who understand the meaning of true refreshment and who give each other full permission to rest as much as needed.

As you look back at the four points we've talked about this morning, ask yourself:

1. Do I see myself as Christ's \_\_\_\_\_? Whatever you do, have you reframed your identity so that you see your circumstances in light of your faith in Christ and his purposes?
2. Am I remembering to thank God for people? It's a simple, practical question. Who are the individuals that are causing the most upheaval in our life right now? Can we thank God for them before interacting with them? Thanking God for people will impact our relationships.
3. Am I being generous with my faith? I don't need to be reciting speeches or forcing my beliefs on anyone. But am I willing to share what I've experienced of God with people who need reminding that He's real?
4. Have I given myself permission to rest? What one thing in my life do I think will fall apart if I take a break? Even God took a day of rest, and he never gets tired. What refreshing do I need, and what's one practical way I can bring some refreshment into somebody else's life as well?