

Philemon: Who's the Main Character

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Introduction

- We began in Paul's letter to Philemon by asking a short but somewhat tectonic kind of question: *How, as followers of Jesus, should we seek to change the world?*
- Through Paul's words we see the character of Jesus, and how this ugly rift between Philemon and Onesimus could be mended.
- So this little letter, along with the rest of the New Testament, would suggest that shaping or changing the world as followers of Jesus isn't done by arrogance, dominance or selfishness, but instead through humility, service and generosity.
- Now it would only be natural to feel humbled or even overwhelmed by such a picture, especially since we know how often Christians have misunderstood what changing the world looks like – at times we've gotten this so wrong that the cross has been turned *back into* a symbol of oppression and terror, rather than the symbol of grace and peace.
- But this shouldn't put us off what Jesus and the first Christians insisted we get on with, and that's because of one very important and final question we'll ask of this letter today.

Who is the Main Character?

- When we read Philemon, in order to get anything out of it, I think we need to ask: Who's the main character? Is it Paul, Philemon, Onesimus?
- The answer is found in the words on which the entire letter is hinged.
- Verse 6: *"...I (Paul) am praying that you (Philemon) will put into action the generosity that comes from your faith as you understand and experience all the good things we have in Christ."*
- Who is the main character in this letter?
- Paul knows, and so he prays, that reconciliation and healing is only possible if Philemon grasps what is meant for him "in Christ".

- In other words, for the first Christians, the world was never going to change by *humans looking to themselves* for the solution, but by paying close attention to Jesus - to *understand and experience* everything summed up *in him*.
- Jesus was the *main character* by which grace and peace had and would change the world.

In Christ?

- “In Christ” is a phrase found throughout Paul’s writing, it’s one of his favorites. So what are some of the “good things” Paul would want Philemon to understand and experience?

In Jesus we have a foundation

- York Minster – pay attention to the foundation.
- “...just as you accepted Christ Jesus as your Lord, you must now continue to follow him. Let your roots grow down into him, and let your lives be built on him. Then your faith will grow strong in the truth you were taught...” (Colossians 2.6-7)
- Often I have gotten tired of trying to be a good Christian, and I’ve met others who’ve felt the same way. And sometimes that has to do with a neglect of the foundation, as Paul would say it, that we have in Christ.
- Many of us set out, with good intentions, to work very hard for Jesus or be a good person. And there is a danger of becoming overly preoccupied with our efforts, either trying to be good person or with asking the question “What would Jesus do?”
- This is a good question, but should always be asked in light of a far more important question: “What has Jesus already done?”
- The cross and resurrection means that *through Jesus something* has happened and the world is now different.
- The cross isn’t just a good example, and Jesus just a sort of heavenly life coach.
- Much more than this, Jesus’ life, death and resurrection is the very foundation on which Christian life is even possible.
- As one Jesus scholar likes to say, the gospel is good news, not just good advice! (Tom Wright)

- And so for Paul, until Philemon *understands and experiences* what Jesus accomplished he can't hope to act as Jesus acted. Otherwise it's just behavior modification, not life transformation.
- This *understanding and experience*, of course, is a life long journey. It's a standing at the foot of the cross, and at the entrance to the empty tomb and learning to say, "Thank you" over and over again, season after season. This is why the Lord's Supper is vital in our worship as a church: Do this, Jesus says, to remember me, to remember what I've done, the new world, the new reality I have founded.
- Going back to our building imagery: we can only build in the shape of the cross by paying attention to it as a foundation. Or, to put it the other way, we should only ever ask "what would Jesus do"? after first asking "what has Jesus *already* accomplished?"
- So for those of us feeling weary or confused about following Jesus today, I have good news – following Jesus means first remembering that *what Jesus did for you is far more important than what you could ever do for him*.
- Jesus has done the heavy lifting and the foundation laying. So we needn't frantically dash about here and there, living on the fringes of near burn out, trying to solve all the world's problems. The world is very much God's problem, and his solution has already been launched through Jesus' death and resurrection.
- I like the words of another scholar: *I two pieces have two pieces of good news, there is a Messiah, and you're not him*. (Father James Martin)
- So in Jesus we have a foundation.

In Jesus we have a pattern

- Of course, once we pay attention to the foundation, always asking "what has Jesus done?", it's only right to set about building, or asking "what would Jesus do?"
- Perhaps we can put the two together and ask: "what should I now begin *because* of what Jesus has already *finished*?" (NT Wright, *The Challenge of Jesus*)
- "*Don't be selfish; don't try to impress others. Be humble, thinking of others as better than yourselves. Don't look out only for your own interests, but take an interest in others, too. You must have the same attitude that Christ had.*" (Philippians 2.3-5)

- I'm one of those people who needs instructions to build things, especially if those things come from Swedish furniture stores. The moment I stop referring back to the instructions, to the pattern, is the moment I start making silly mistakes. I have to follow the pattern or things quickly go sideways, literally.
- Paul says elsewhere in Ephesians, *"Live a life filled with love, following the example of Christ. He loved us and offered himself as a sacrifice for us..."* (Ephesians 5.2)
- And that's also what Paul is praying and saying in Philemon, and also in Colossians and Philippians too – Jesus is not only the foundation but the blueprint. He's both the sure footing and the shape to follow, the crucial pattern in which to build.
- That was certainly one of the reasons God arrived in Jesus to live with us, wasn't it? Who better than the one who made us to show us to show us who we are and what we're meant for?
- And so we shouldn't be surprised, while following Jesus, if we become more loving, more filled with grace and peace, more alive, more like the one who made all life in the first place!

In Jesus was have God's presence / power

- The last "good thing we have in Christ" we'll look at today is the fuel Paul himself thrived on; put simply, in Jesus we have God's power or presence in order to serve, give and love.
- Paul says in Galatians, *"Since we are living by the Spirit, let us follow the Spirit's leading in every part of our lives..."* (Galatians 5.25).
- Paul wanted Philemon not only to *understand and experience* the foundation and pattern of Jesus but the animating breath of Jesus' in and with him.
- I've only ever been sailing once, and for a week. But if there's one thing I learned it's that no matter how well the boat is designed, or how committed and capable the crew, this thing won't go anywhere without the presence (or power) it was designed to be moved or enlivened by, namely the wind.
- And that's something like the Holy Spirit's role in the Church or an individual Christian life. The Spirit of Jesus filling and enlivening us to do what we are made to do.

Let's look at this all drawn together

- In John's gospel we see all three of these "good things in Christ" drawn together when Jesus appears to the disciples after his death and resurrection.
- *"That Sunday evening the disciples were meeting behind locked doors because they were afraid of the Jewish leaders. Suddenly, Jesus was standing there among them! "Peace be with you," he said. As he spoke, he showed them the wounds in his hands and his side. They were filled with joy when they saw the Lord! Again he said, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I am sending you." Then he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone's sins, they are forgiven. If you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven." (John 20.19-23)*
- What's Jesus up to here? Well, to use Paul's language and our imagery today:
 - Jesus is showing himself to be the foundation (*he showed them the wounds in his hands and his side*)
 - Jesus is sending them to follow his pattern (*As the Father has sent me, so I am sending you.*)
 - He's giving them the presence, power to do it (*Then he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit."*)
- And notice what else Jesus says, *"If you forgive anyone's sins, they are forgiven. If you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven."*
- Paul's prayer for Philemon is that he would *understand and experience* all the good things he has in Christ, the result of which - Paul hopes - is what, between Philemon and Onesimus? Forgiveness of sin, in other words, reconciliation.
- *So understanding and experiencing all the good things we have in Christ* - the foundation of the cross and resurrection, the pattern of Jesus, the power of his Spirit - really does mean we can change and shape the world in a new way!
- We can forgive people their sin rather than hold it against them, breaking the cycle of retaliation and hatred. We can offer someone grace and peace when it hasn't been earned. We can help bring reconciliation to a fractured and divisive world.

Conclusion

- This letter is a cliff-hanger isn't. It begs the question, what did Philemon do with Onesimus?
- Maybe the better question to ask is not what did Philemon do with Onesimus, but what will you do with him? With the person sitting next to you, or the family living next door to you, or the co-worker down the hall? And those are questions only you and I can answer today.

Discussion Questions

- Given your understanding of the letter, describe what Paul, Philemon and Onesimus might be like without Jesus. What would their lives look like?
- Describe a time in your life when Jesus was certainly not "the main character". Describe a time when he has been.
- What does it look like to let Jesus be the main character of our lives? What changes when Jesus moves to the center and we let him call the shots? In marriage, family, friendships?