

Modelling Christ in Our Relationships

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[0 : 00] So we're looking at the verses of Philemon we've just heard read, those wonderful few verses. Our reading tonight is part of a little letter written to an individual, Philemon, and to two others named as Aphia and Archippus.

They're probably his wife and his son, but the letter was to be read to the whole church. Now, Paul presumably wrote lots of personal letters, but this is the one that's been kept, and when we look at it, we'll see just why it was kept.

Now, we have to deduce the context of the letter from what it says in it. It seems that Anisimus, Philemon's slave, has run away from Colossae in Asia Minor in modern Turkey and has arrived most probably in Rome, where through God's amazing providence, he's come into contact with Paul in prison and become a Christian.

And of course, the other extraordinary thing is having arrived in prison, and he met Paul in prison, he discovers that Paul actually knows his owner back in Colossae.

There's another possibility, which is rather similar to that, which is that, in fact, Anisimus has misbehaved. That comes up in next week's passage. He's probably stolen something, and he's sought refuge with a friend of his master's, who he hopes will intercede for him.

[1 : 40] In this case, Anisimus actually knew Paul, and he thought he was someone of kindness and sympathy, and so he sought him out.

In that case, that's different from just being a fugitive. It was possible for a slave who'd offended his master to look for a sort of broker in that sense, and he looks for Paul, and he comes to him, and he seeks Paul to intercede for him, which wasn't quite the same as being a fugitive and running away from one's owner altogether.

But in either case, whether he is a fugitive in the full sense, or whether he's seeking someone to intercede for him, Paul is now sending Anisimus back to his owner.

And I think when we hear that, we feel some sort of questions rise in our hearts. That's a difficult context for us. A slave sent by a Christian leader back to his owner.

And I will address that in a moment, but not yet. I don't know whether as you sit there you think, I wonder why a reader got this tonight. You know, has he really been giving this so that he can take one for the team?

[3 : 00] Is that how it works? You can judge whether you think that that's what I'm doing tonight when you reach the end of the sermon. So what struck you tonight as you heard those nine verses?

The thing that struck me most as I read them was Paul's gentleness. I mean, some of us think of Paul as pushy, always giving apostolic commands.

But here we see Paul laying out what he'd like to happen. Now, I think that he would like Anisimus to be given his freedom, but he certainly doesn't tell Philemon to do that.

What he says in verse 14 is this, I did not want to do anything without your consent, so that any favor you do would not seem forced, but would be voluntary.

Any favor you do is literally your good. Perhaps we could translate it your good deed. Now, I think your good deed is setting Anisimus free.

[4 : 07] But either way, he doesn't want to do anything without Philemon's consent, so that his good deed would not seem forced, but would be voluntary. If we think about gentleness, we might think of the way in which God calls us to be generous.

The growth groups have been thinking about generosity. Now, generosity is an imperative in the Bible, but there's no statement of exactly what we have to do.

We have to read the Bible and then make a good decision. Just so Philemon has to think through the implications of Anisimus becoming a brother in Christ, what that means for their relationship,

and what he has to do about it.

In verses 8 and 9, Paul writes, Although in Christ I could be bold and order you to do what you ought to do, yet I prefer to appeal to you on the basis of love.

He doesn't claim that he's... He doesn't take his authority as an apostle.

[5 : 27] He just says, I'm an old man, and now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus. Claiming that he's worthy of respect on the grounds of both age and faithfulness to Christ.

I think this is Paul's only letter where he doesn't speak about the death and resurrection of Jesus. And yet now, we see Paul himself mediating between Anisimus and Philemon.

Bringing them together, just as Christ brings his people together at the foot of the cross. I appeal to you, he says, on the basis of love.

Perhaps Paul's appeal is an example for us of Christian leadership. Whatever our role, if we're a roots group leader, or a growth group leader, or a minister, Paul's example encourages us into a style of leadership that points people in the right direction, but then lets them go and decide the obedience Christ requires of them.

Anne Lamott, I don't know how you pronounce her name, puts it like this. You don't always have to chop with the sword of truth. You can point with it, too.

[6 : 55] Jewett, on the basis of a theological student from Zimbabwe, put it like this. Slavery is a system of bossing people around. If Paul had bossed Philemon, the slave master might submit and grudgingly free Anisimus, but the principle of domination would still be intact, and slavery would spring up again inside the church in more ways than one.

Instead, Paul subverts the entire system of domination by appealing to Philemon's free decision to act in a manner consistent with the equality and love between brothers and sisters in Christ.

Or we might think of Jesus' own words in Mark, when he called the disciples together and said, You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them.

Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all.

For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many. Paul is an amazing example of gentle leadership.

[8 : 25] And Paul as a leader also displays a generosity that he would like Philemon to show.

Verse 13. I would have liked to keep him with me.

That's Anisimus with me. So that he could take your place in helping me while I am in chains for the gospel. But I did not want to do anything without your consent.

Paul longed to have Anisimus to look after him in his prison cell. But he sends him back. It's difficult to expect others to be generous.

If we won't be ourselves. Gentle and generous leadership by Paul. I am going to get to the question of slavery in the end.

But first let's turn to Anisimus. Now he's not actually named until nearly halfway through the letter. I think that's rather striking. I'm going to read the way it's expressed in the New English Bible.

[9 : 29] I'm going to start from verse 7 and read through to verses 10 and 11. For I am delighted and encouraged by your love.

Through you, my brother, God's people have been much refreshed. Accordingly, although in Christ I might make bold to point out your duty, yet because of that same love I would rather appeal to you.

Yes, I, Paul, ambassador as I am of Christ Jesus, and now his prisoner, appeal to you about my child, whose father I have become in this prison.

Paul says, isn't that exciting when you hear it read for the first time? There people will go, oh, Paul's had a child in prison. Obviously not a physical child. He's had a child who's been born again through Paul's witness, even in prison.

It's possible through Paul for someone to become a child of God. And in one sense a child of Paul.

[10 : 36] The gospel's not chained. But then he goes on, whose father I have become in this prison, I mean Anisimus. Once so little use to you.

Well, if I even hadn't heard the letter before, it was read out in church. Well, I wonder how his view changed at this point. Did he suddenly get a frown?

But up to that point, how exciting! A new brother in Christ. But it's Anisimus. He may have read it beforehand.

I may just be painting a picture that is just a picture. But it's not easy for Philemon. We'll come to that in a moment. In one sense, of course, Anisimus was not a very exciting convert.

He was a fugitive, probably hiding in the slums of Rome when he was converted. But the gospel is that anyone, whether they're a rich tax collector like Zacchaeus, or whether they're a slave owner like Philemon, or a poor slave like Anisimus, can be converted.

[11 : 51] And that whoever they are, whoever we are, we all become brothers and sisters in Christ. Now, Anisimus' name means useful.

Slightly sort of mean name that people gave to slaves. It was obviously a sort of optimistic name. You hope that Anisimus was going to be useful. And then, of course, apparently he turned out to be useless.

So that made his name even more embarrassing. I suppose someone like Joy, who's rather gloomy, or whatever it is. But to be a useless useful would seem rather sad.

But the miracle is that this unprepossessing chap, Mr. Useless, has now become Mr. Useful in the end. Verse 11, Formerly he was useless to you, but now he has become useful both to you and to me.

As a believer, he now lives up to the name that he was originally given. Do you like Thomas the Tang Engine?

[12 : 59] There's one story I particularly like, and I like the way it expresses the value of usefulness. It's that story of Percy and the Sunday school party.

And Percy has to bring the Sunday school home through this flood. The water's right over the tracks. You can get the sort of picture.

And when he gets them back, the fat controller said, Harold, that's the helicopter who was watching from above, told me you were wizard, Percy. He says he can beat you at some things, Percy snorted, but not at being a submarine.

He chuckled. I don't know what you've been playing at, and I won't ask, but I do know that you're a really useful engine.

Oh, sir, whispered Percy happily. Well, that's what had happened to Anisimus. He was now a really useful person.

[14 : 02] Paul says, He is my very heart, in verse 12. He was a practical help to Paul. Verse 13. As I think I've already said, I would have liked to keep him with me so that he could take your place in helping me while I'm in chains for the gospel.

And Paul sends Anisimus back to resolve the situation. Paul doesn't say that the laws of the state don't matter. He sends Anisimus back.

Anisimus is carrying the letter that we're looking at tonight. Picture what it must have been like for him as he traveled. Every step closer to Colossae might be a step closer to death.

Philemon could have a fugitive slave put to death or branded. However, Anisimus has some encouragement. He knows what sort of a person Philemon is.

Moreover, he's got a chap called Tychicus to travel with. And he's got this letter, which maybe he's read and he's been encouraged by.

[15 : 17] Anisimus comes with a poor and checkered past. He comes with a transformed present. And there's a hint of an eternal future, I think, in verse 15.

Paul wrote to Philemon, you might have him back forever. The word translated forever is the word translated eternal in the phrase eternal life. But there is one thing that Anisimus has that encourages him, I think, as he comes home.

He comes in a way wrapped in Paul. Paul says of him, you're useful to me. He's useful to me. He's my very heart.

He's very dear to me. And I think when we get to next week, it becomes even more clear that Philemon is to look on Anisimus as he looks on Paul.

Luther pointed out that whereas in this letter, Philemon is to receive Anisimus as wrapped in Paul, so the Father sees us as wrapped in Christ.

[16 : 26] I'll say that again. Philemon is to receive Anisimus as wrapped or clothed in Paul, so the Father sees us as wrapped or clothed in Christ.

And that's an enormous encouragement to us. And I think it was an encouragement to Anisimus as he came home on that. It's a long way if you're walking all the way from Rome to Colossae. In Colossians 4 verse 9, the letter that's also traveling with Tychicus, both the letters are coming together.

Paul there talks about Anisimus as our dear, our faithful and dear brother. And in verse 16 of our letter, Anisimus is very dear to me, but even dearer to you, Philemon, both as a fellow man and as a brother in the Lord.

So we're going to get to the crunch. How Philemon should respond. That's really the theme of the letter. The letter is about gentle and generous leadership by Paul.

[17 : 40] It's about grace and transformation for Anisimus. And now it's about Philemon's response. That favor that the NIV talks about, more literally goodness or good work.

That's what Paul's looking for from Philemon. And I'm almost there. But before we get there, let's think about one more thing first.

Let's think about what sort of letter this is. It's not a letter from Paul to the Senate, encouraging the Roman Senate to give up on slavery.

Paul isn't telling the Senate how the country should be organized. It would have been pointless and dangerous. I think today, it does little good when we tell the Scottish Parliament what God's sexual standards are.

That doesn't mean we shouldn't bear witness to God's word. But some things don't actually change what happens. No, Paul is dealing with one person.

[18 : 51] This is a letter to an individual, to Philemon. He's writing to him, primarily. But it's copied to the whole church. So everyone else gets to see how Philemon responds to this letter.

And Paul is actually getting the church to have a whole new way of looking at something. And I do believe that in the end, in the hands of Wilberforce and of the others who helped him to bring slavery to an end, people like Farrell Buxton, for example, we know where the seeds that this letter planted ended up.

Now, it wasn't easy for Philemon. We think, well, he's just got to set Anisimus free and that's it. But it was difficult for Philemon.

About a third of the inhabitants of the Roman Empire were slaves. And the Romans were terrified that the slaves would revolt. So it wouldn't go down well with Philemon's fellow slave owners to be soft on a runaway.

Philemon was being called to something embarrassing that would be financially costly. And something that might lead all these other slaves to say, oh, I'm a Christian too.

[20 : 16] You set me free. But, Paul makes it very clear that Philemon is meeting someone who is a dear brother.

And that, as brothers, Philemon has to forgive. Now, it's so easy for me to say, get on with it, Philemon, forgive.

Part of course, Philemon's dead. But, even if I was saying that to one of you, it's pretty easy for me to say that to you. You've just got to forgive whoever it is. The difficult thing is for me to do the forgiving.

Forgiveness is easy to recommend, but hard sometimes to do. And yet, we've already prayed tonight, forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.

But there is no doubt that that's what Philemon has to do. The bigger question, of course, is, does he have to do more than forgive? Does he actually have to free Anisimus?

[21 : 34] We don't know the answer to that question. Colossians, which came with it, makes no suggestion of it when it talks about slavery. But if we read verse 16, it is very striking that you might have him back forever, no longer as a slave, but better than a slave as a dear brother.

What do we think of that? No longer? Anisimus used to bring in the pizza and sherry after morning worship. Now he's a brother, taking part in the meeting, discussing Paul's letters.

Later when the Gospels arrived, he'd be there to talk about them too. He was in a completely new relationship. He's very dear to Paul, but even dearer to Philemon, both as a fellow man, which is literally in the flesh, which I think means in the world of human relationships, and as a brother in the Lord.

We don't know the end of the story. This is where the story ends as far as we can, what you've got next week, but it won't answer the question, I don't think, any more than I've been able to tonight.

That's up to James.

But I think Anisimus was forgiven. I don't think Philemon would have kept the letter otherwise if he'd actually not responded well to it. I think the letter would have somehow vanished.

[23 : 08] Was Anisimus given his freedom? We don't know. We do know from Ignatius that there was a bishop of Ephesus just before the end of the first century called Anisimus.

Could that be our Anisimus? It's only a speculation. It wasn't that rare a name, really. Although I suspect it must have been a freed slave. I don't know.

Did other people call their children Anisimus? I have no idea. It seems odd. I never thought of calling our child useful. I'll get myself into a muddle here. But anyway, may we not only experience grace like Anisimus and become as useful as he.

May we give gentle and generous leadership like Paul. But the challenge tonight comes to show the goodness of Philemon in forgiving those who have wronged us.

I mentioned at the very beginning of my sermon one encouraging feature of the story that is there in the background which is the providence of God. I'll read verse 15 one more time.

[24 : 25] Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back forever. Is there a suggestion there that it's more than a suggestion, isn't there?

That God's hand is in this whole thing. In Anisimus, getting all the way to Rome, meeting up with the great apostle and then coming back.

God's hand is in all that. Anisimus was met by God a long way from home through someone who already knew Philemon. The providence of God is an enormously encouraging thought as we work through, as we go forward into the week.

Let's pray as we sit. Heavenly Father, we thank you for your word. We thank you for all it teaches us.

We thank you for Paul. We thank you for his example of leadership and we pray that you would help us to be leaders like he was, following the pattern of the Lord Jesus.

[25 : 42] We thank you for the grace that Anisimus experienced. we thank you that you have drawn us to yourself and that you are making us useful.

We pray this week that we may display usefulness for you. And above all, we pray that we may be people who forgive those who have offended us.

So go with us, Lord, into the week. For we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.