

Tough Love for Tough Times

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Date: 11 April 2021

Preacher: James Lapping

- [0 : 0 0] I suspect that as we go through Philemon over the next three Sundays, we're going to hear a multitude of ways of saying Philemon. But I think that's okay.
- So just enjoy the ride a bit. Great. It's great to be with you guys. If you are new here this evening, a big warm welcome to you. A big warm welcome to you guys at home.
- My name's James. I'm on staff team here at St. Silas. And I'm going to try and give us a bit of a steer through this passage tonight. I'm not brilliantly convinced I got there, but hopefully something will be helpful to you guys.
- Let's pray as we begin. Father, thank you that in Jesus there is complete equality. That there is level ground at the cross.
- That in Jesus, in his death and resurrection, we have been reconciled to you. And as we come to hear tonight from Philemon, please help us to consider how we may become less that others might benefit.
- [1 : 0 2] Please help us to think through how we can love others better as partners in Christ. Amen. Great. If you look up there.
- Well, I wonder how you'd feel if you had a good friend who let you down or hurt you in some way. Maybe they borrowed your car and they crashed it completely and you've forgotten to renew your insurance on it.
- Maybe they've stolen your boyfriend or girlfriend or have hooked up with him afterwards after you've broken up with him. Maybe they've borrowed your laptop and they've smashed it and the hard drive has fallen in a pool of water and it's been completely erased.
- I wonder how you would feel about that and how you'd feel the next Sunday morning when they walked into church and you knew you'd have to greet them and say hello and be nice to them.
- And well, as we jump into Philemon this evening, we're only going to look at the first seven verses there. And as Ali alluded, it's a short letter, but it is explosive.
- [2 : 1 2] It's dynamite packed. And as Ali said earlier, it follows on the back of a series that we did in Colossians last term. And we remember in Colossians how that brilliant picture was painted of how God's people are a new humanity in Christ.
- And that we find our identity in Jesus. And we had that brilliant verse from Colossians 3. Set your hearts on things above where Christ is seated.
- So we might be sitting in Glasgow, but spiritually we are in heaven with Jesus. And then again, that picture of that wonderful community in chapter 311. Here there is no Gentile or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free.
- But Christ is all and is in all. And the letter to the Colossians was written by Paul and delivered by his friend Tychicus, who at the same time delivered this short letter, Philemon.
- And Philemon, to give you the back story there, he probably met Paul in nearby Ephesus and was converted through the ministry of Paul.

[3 : 30] And as Tychicus brings this letter to Philemon, he brings along with him Onesimus, who is a runaway slave. And Paul writes to the Colossian church that the Colossians are to receive Onesimus.

So in 4.9, Tychicus is coming with Onesimus, our faithful and dear brother, who is one of you. The Colossians are meant to receive this runaway slave as a brother.

And so Onesimus has run away and he's met Philemon in prison. And he's wronged Philemon in some way and he's met Paul in prison.

And then Onesimus becomes a Christian through the ministry of Paul. He becomes his ministry trainee, as it were. And so Paul writes this delicate letter to Philemon, hoping that Philemon might be reconciled with Onesimus.

And what's more, that he might welcome him back into his household, not simply as a slave, but as a brother in Christ.

[4 : 41] And so as we look at it tonight, we're going to try and unpack two thoughts that will help us as Christians. And that I think Paul is making from these opening seven verses of Philemon, of what it will look like for us to be reconciled to one another, even when it really, really hurts.

So here are my two points. The first one is perseverance in suffering is worth it for the refreshment of others.

Perseverance in suffering is worth it for the refreshment of others. And then secondly, partnership in action makes you more Christ-like.

Partnership in action makes you more Christ-like. So our first point there, perseverance in suffering is worth it for the refreshment of others.

Now, the big aim or theme in this letter, and that Paul is trying to persuade Philemon, is that he needs to be reconciled to Onesimus, and Ali prayed that for us.

[5 : 49] And while this letter is addressed to Philemon, it's written to the whole church. They are all overhearing this letter. But notice how Paul introduces himself right at the start of this letter in verse 1.

Very unusual, not like any of his other letters. What does he say? Paul, a prisoner of Christ. Where is Paul physically? He's in prison.

But where is Paul spiritually? Where is his heart? Well, end of verse 7. Your love has given me great joy and encouragement.

He's rejoicing. Don't you think that's strange? And why? Because Philemon has refreshed the hearts of the Lord's people in verse 7.

And that's what Philemon's done in the past. And that's what Paul is hoping Philemon will do in the future in his friendship and relationship with Onesimus.

[6 : 52] That he will refresh my heart, says Paul, verse 20. Well, how has Philemon refreshed their hearts? By loving God's people.

And I always thank God because I hear about your love for all God's holy people. So what's going on? Paul may be in prison physically, suffering.

But he has set his heart on things above. And he is rejoicing with God's people in heaven as he hears how they are being spiritually refreshed and built up and encouraged by Philemon's love.

I wonder if you could just scan down and maybe if you've got a Bible app open at home and just count how many times Paul refers to himself as a prisoner. And he always speaks about it in context of being a prisoner of Jesus.

Why does he do that? Well, I think in some way in this letter, in order for us to be refreshed, to get refreshment, to see others grow in knowledge and love of Jesus, then it means that someone has to persevere in suffering.

[8 : 13] Someone has to take a hard knock. But why is Paul making this point here right at the start of his letter? And I think the reason for this is that in order for Onesimus and Philemon to be reconciled, it would mean that Philemon would persevere in suffering.

See, in a society where there was a strict hierarchy between slaves and masters, and we imagine that North and South TV series where all the masters are huddling in the room and all the workers are in the mill factories, maybe you've seen it, and you don't break ranks, to elevate a slave and accept him as your equal, as your brother, was incredibly risky.

It would be a no-no. You would be dishonored for letting a slave who disrespected you get away. And never mention the financial loss involved.

You can't get Onesimus doing your chores anymore. And Onesimus would have to own up to what he had done.

But the result is that there would be refreshment for Onesimus. He would be reconciled. Onesimus would be received back into the church, not as a slave, back into the household, but as a dearly loved brother.

[9 : 41] He would be forgiven and accepted. Thinking through you and your friend that something's gone wrong with him, what is going to happen that you might be reconciled with then?

My guess is that someone, one of you, is going to have to take a hit, as it were. One of you is going to have to persevere in suffering, maybe both.

But hopefully, both of you would be refreshed and you would be reconciled. And so, when Paul, to whom both Philemon and Onesimus owe so much, deliberately lowers himself to the rank of a prisoner at the start of his letter, even slaves were above prisoners, it's a powerful picture of what persevering and suffering for the refreshment of others might look like.

So, let's apply this quickly before we move on. Now, the idea of persevering in suffering for the refreshment, for the spiritual good of others, that they might know and love Jesus, is something that is very foreign to us.

You don't go to university. You don't move to G11. You don't get a good job to suffer. You do those things to try and avoid suffering. You want the good life.

[11 : 03] But the surest way to wreck your faith is to forget that it is worthwhile persevering and suffering for the refreshment of others, for spiritual gains, that they might know Jesus better.

So, maybe you've come here tonight and you're a guest and you're kind of wondering what Christianity is about and you've heard this passage read and you think it's absolutely outrageous. You might say, why is Paul, God's apostle, not condemned slavery in this passage?

How can a good God be good if his spokesperson doesn't speak up against the evil of slavery? Maybe you've been a Christian for a number of years and you think, how can God be good if there's so much suffering in the world?

He's either not good or he's not God. Well, how does Paul answer this question? Set your hearts on things above. Look for the refreshment of others that they would know and love the Lord Jesus more dearly.

See, the Bible condemns injustice. It condemns slavery. And the greatest injustice in the Bible is calling a good God bad. And the worst slavery in the Bible is the spiritual enslavement that we are all in to sin and death.

[12 : 32] And so the letter of Philemon is not about slavery, but it's about life. It's about reconciliation. How God has reconciled his people to himself, of which slavery is a sign of their broken relationship with them.

It's the very reason that slavery and suffering is in the world is that they have not been reconciled with God. And in the letter of Philemon, we have this wonderful picture of what it looks like when God's reconciliation breaks into the world and of how he reconciles people and how they set their hearts on things above.

Let me ask you, why is this letter in the Bible? Why did they think to include this letter in this Bible? Because Philemon and Onesimus were reconciled.

It's here as a record of what it looks like when God's reconciliation breaks into the world and where his people live as his new humanity being transformed, setting their hearts on things above.

The second idea that Philemon needs to take on board, if he is to be reconciled with Onesimus, is that partnership in action or for partnership to be effective will make you more Christ-like.

[13 : 57] Now, I wonder if you just scan through our passage this evening, verses 1 to 7 there, and just count how many times the word fellow or partner is used.

I won't get you to shout it out, but it's quite a few. It comes up throughout this passage. It's the key word in the letter of Philemon. So here's, and the key verse comes in verse 6.

And he's setting this up for, Paul is setting this up, this idea of partnership, because this is what he's going to appeal to later when he makes his request of Philemon.

So verse 6, I pray that your partnership with us in the faith may be effective in deepening your understanding of every good thing we share for the sake of Christ.

Often when we speak about partnership or fellowship at church, we imagine tea after the service, and tea's good, I like tea, but we think of COVID as bad because we can't have fellowship here.

[14 : 56] But Paul is talking about something far deeper here, far stronger than simply tea after the service. He's talking about a mutual participation, getting involved, rolling your sleeves up, partnering with others in sacrificial living, loving them as we grow deeper in understanding of what it means that Christ died for us, and as we grow into Christ as his new people, becoming more like Christ in Christ-likeness.

And the partnership or fellowship here is modeled for us by Philemon in that his love for God's people, in his love for God's people, and his faith in Jesus.

That's what it looks like to be a partner in this letter. Just look down at verse 5 there. Because I heard about your love for all his holy people and your faith in the Lord Jesus.

So if you are looking in this evening and you're wondering what is a Christian, a Christian is someone who loves God's people and trusts and believes in Jesus.

And we see two effects from this love and faith, this partnership and action in these verses. Firstly, verse 6, it leads Philemon into an experiential knowledge of every good thing that he has in Christ.

[16 : 23] That is, as Philemon acts on his Christian faith, as he loves other people, so he grows in knowledge and understanding of who Jesus is.

He experiences all the things that Jesus experienced, and he becomes more Christ-like in deepening his understanding.

He lives the gospel. He tastes the gospel. He realizes what Christ went through. He knows what it is. He knows what it feels like to be rejected by your significant friends when you invite them to do word one-to-one with you or something like that.

He knows what it is like to sacrificially empty yourself Sunday by Sunday or Friday night by Friday night at the youth club or teaching youth or helping out at Glasgow City Mission, speaking to down and outs there about the Lord Jesus.

He knows what that feels like. Jesus knows that. But at the same time, Philemon, knows what it feels like as he lives this life, seeking to love and serve the Lord Jesus, to be comforted by God, to be loved by God, that as he experiences rejection and hardships for Christ, so he grows in knowledge and understanding of what Jesus went through for him.

[17 : 48] He knows what Jesus felt like and how Jesus loved him despite all those hardships. The second effect that Philemon has, that Philemon's putting his partnership into action, has here.

We see in verse 7, your love has given me great joy and encouragement. And why? Because you, brother, have refreshed the hearts of the Lord's people.

Philemon has put his partnership in the gospel into action and he has refreshed the hearts of God's people and he has brought joy to Paul. So the logic here, as Philemon has exercised his partnership through trusting in Jesus, loving his people, verse 5, he's grown as a Christian, become more like Jesus and in depth and knowledge of understanding, verse 6, and so he has encouraged and refreshed the hearts of other Christians around him, verse 7.

And so here is the thing. If you want to put your partnership with Christ into effect in your life, as Paul and Philemon have done, such that you grow in deepening understanding of every good thing we share in Christ, becoming more like him day by day, feeling what Jesus felt, Jesus' values becoming our values, such that we are willing to die for others, for their spiritual good, as Jesus did, lay our lives down, emptying ourselves daily, then the question is, where would you find your joy and happiness in life?

If that's your mindset in life, when you're in the prison cell that Paul finds himself in verse 1, are you going to find it in your own comforts and circumstances?

[19 : 41] Or you're going to find it in seeing others being refreshed through the love of your brothers and sisters around you.

So Philemon is going to be reconciled to Anisimus, if he is going to live as one of God's new people in Christ, then the only way that is going to happen is if he puts his partnership with others and with Christ into action, that he accepts Anisimus, even though every worldly instinct, even though his culture around him was telling him not to.

Just thinking about your friend, if they have hurt you, then there is a point when in order for you to be reconciled with them, one of you is going to have to put your partnership into action.

One of you is going to have to step forward and love them sacrificially, even though your friends and family might say that's a bit foolish to you.

One of you is going to have to step out expecting nothing in return. And one way that we put our partnership into action is by persevering in suffering for the refreshment of others.

[21 : 04] Well, as we come into land, it's a bit of a warm evening, sorry about that. Paul is writing because he wants Philemon and Anisimus to be reconciled.

But this is only going to happen if Philemon puts himself out for the sake of Anisimus, if he perseveres in suffering for his refreshment.

And that's only going to happen if Philemon puts his partnership into action, becoming more Christ-like, experiencing all the heartaches and disappointments that Jesus experienced.

If we think about those awkward friendships at church, when our friends at church let us down or when we have risky conversations with friends who might be wondering about the Christian faith and it doesn't go brilliantly well, then the thing that's going to keep us going is understanding that we need to persevere in suffering for the refreshment of others.

And that as we put our partnership in Jesus into action, so we become more like Jesus day by day. And that's good news.

[22 : 19] And in a word, what does Paul thank God for about Philemon? What brings Paul great joy and encouragement even in prison?

In a word, love. That we love others even when it's hard or unpopular. And that our love is self-forgetful and self-sacrificial.

It's a love that puts itself out and will forgive the most outrageous of wrongs. That covers over a multitude of wrongs. It's a love that looks out for the interests of others more than our own interests.

It's a love that will make any hardship or suffering in this life bearable if it is for our good and for the spiritual good and refreshment of others.

Let's pray. So, fathers, we come to celebrate communion now. We think of how Jesus endured suffering for our spiritual good, for our refreshment.

[23 : 33] We think how Jesus put his partnership with us into action and so learned to be, learned to perfection through obedience and how his perfect life became our life and how all our sins went on to him.

And so, Father, please help us to eat the bread tonight and drink the wine as folk who delight and rejoice in our partnership in Jesus and that we have been called to suffer along with that.

for the refreshment of others in big ways, in small ways, in all sorts of ways in this week coming. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Amen.