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# Redemption Applied

## *A Gospel Community in Action*

### Philemon

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#### Introduction

Ephesians 4:1, 15-16 I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called... speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.

What should a church look like? (Photos of area churches in ppt, including clearcreek). Should it look like this? Or maybe this? How about that? Because you are clever people, you know that this is a trick question. You thought to yourselves, aha, he cannot trick me – I know that “the church” is not a building at all, but a people. Perhaps then, a church should look like this (Photo of the first page of Philemon from my Bible). Hmmm. That’s interesting. Maybe you hadn’t thought of it that way...Philemon as a snapshot of the church, perhaps an action photo.

Consider another snapshot... I think some of you know that part of my gainful employment is as a researcher. I investigate the relationship between religiosity, spirituality, and health. Currently I am teaching a course on this topic and as part of our classroom experience, we go around to different religious organizations on the campus of the University of Cincinnati. Several weeks ago we found ourselves in the campus ministry center of a particular religious group. Per my habit, we cornered who ever we could and asked them all kinds of questions about their religious ideas and how they felt religion related to health. A stock question that I like to use is, “Do you feel that what happens in religious groups is any different than what happens on a bowling team?”

That question caused our student host who was touring us through the facility to pause and consider for a moment. She said, “Yes, because with a bowling team you are not educated like you are here.” I thought, “okay, fair enough.” Then as we moved on we had the pleasure of meeting the pastoral figure who over saw the ministry. I put the same question to him, confident that the conversation would get a little deeper at this point. He had much to say about the bowling teams and religious groups and in the end, his answer was a clear, “No, there is not much difference.”

So is this where your view of the church leaves you? With kind of an “uber” social experience in which everyone feels good about being together once, or maybe twice, a week... We share stories about work and family, try to have a winning experience together, and above all, we don’t get too involved in each others’ lives because that could really mess things up. We like to keep it neat... If this is the case, you are probably not here on a Sunday night, but just in case you are, or if you happen to listen the podcast or read the manuscript, know that tonight

you will get a glimpse of the first century church which may radically challenge your ideas about church life.

Let's Pray.

This morning we listened as Pastor Dan worked at *elucidating* the glories of redemption. Tonight we will work at *applying* the glories of redemption. That is, if we understand ourselves to be a people who have been redeemed, then how will we live in community together? We will spend the majority of our time simply making observations on the church's actions as recounted in the letter to Philemon. We'll then ask ourselves, "If we set Clearcreek next to this account of the early New Testament church, how do we stack up?"

We'll begin with a very brief recap of the story line, consider the redemptive reality of the gospel community called the church (vv. 4-7), and then consider four practical observations on this community and how it functioned.

## **It's a Mess Out There...and It's a Mess in Here!**

I'm not sure if you've noticed lately, but the natural tendency of things seems to be not to go smoothly. Whether it is a car that breaks down, a deposit that is late, a coworker that is disgruntled, or a child that has decided to have a tantrum at the checkout – life is messy. And if we are honest, it seems to be just as messy among God's people as it does the rest of the world. And sometimes, even more so.

Although Pastor Dan covered it well this morning, let's briefly review the storyline for those who may not have been here this morning – or were here, but just not *all* here. Philemon is the apparent head of the household in which the church in Colosse meets. This church was most likely started by Epaphras, who was a co-missionary with Paul,<sup>1</sup> and Paul probably had never been to Colosse to preach the gospel or visit this church. Onesimus is one of Philemon's household slaves and was not a believer. Onesimus decides to run away. He runs to either Ephesus or Rome, where he somehow comes into the company of Paul, who is currently in jail. Onesimus is gloriously converted under Paul's jail ministry. Paul, putting all the pieces together, realizes at some point that Onesimus is the property of Philemon, in whose house the church at Colosse meets. Paul sends Onesimus back to Philemon. However, he does not send him alone. It appears that Tychicus accompanies Onesimus and is quite possibly carrying with him both the letter to the church in Colosse and the letter to Philemon regarding Onesimus.

So let's consider this situation from a modern day perspective. Let's suppose (Member's Name) has an employee in his payroll department. It comes to light one day that this employee has embezzled \$500,000 from the company and has fled to California. The company is a small operation and suffers greatly from this blow. While in California the embezzler meets a guy named James Street who happens to play in the same soccer league. They get to be buddies and James invites him to his family's home for dinner. At dinner, the embezzler meets none other than John Street! Who of course shares the gospel somewhere between steak and sorbet. The embezzler is converted. Over the course of several months he is disciplined by the

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<sup>1</sup> Colossians 1:7, 4:12

local church and his good friends, the Streets. One day, no longer able to bare his guilt and shame, convicted by the Holy Spirit, the sinner turned saint shares with the Streets the sins of his past. The Streets realize that repentance and obedience in this situation means going back to his previous employer and seeking to make things right, which could mean imprisonment. He tells the Streets that he will have to go back to Ohio. Their ears perk up and they say, “Oh?” “Where in Ohio?” He responds, “To Dayton, Ohio...a little part of it called Springboro.” “No kidding?” John says. “Who was your employer?” “A guy name Mark Schindler, he was in the tech industry...I hurt the business pretty bad...I’m not sure the company even continued after I stole the money...” John Street gulps. He realizes that this is a messy, messy situation that will require discernment, boldness, and “words fitly spoken, like apples of gold in a setting of silver.”<sup>2</sup>

John Street, like Paul, has a mess at his feet – so much like our everyday real lives. Onesimus’ background and past didn’t just “go away” when he repented and called Christ Lord and Savior. Paul didn’t just forget that he knew Philemon and had been intimately associated with Epaphras’ work in starting the church at Colosse. And Philemon surely had not simply waived Onesimus’ desertion off like just another little hassle of his busy life. **We** now have the privilege of watching a gospel community work its redemption fully out as it responds to this sin-tainted situation unfolding in the midst of God’s providence. And isn’t this happening among us everyday...?

Before we begin considering some the *applications of redemption* that we see in the letter to Philemon, let’s glance once more on the effects of redemption in the hearts of first century believers.

## The Horizontal Effects of a Vertical Reality (vv. 4-7)

I believe verses 4-7 of the letter to Philemon are critical to understanding the big picture in this little microcosm of a complicated church situation. It is here we find the root of wise and practical action grounded in the soil of a gospel community transformed by a redemptive reality. Starting in verse 4, Paul says,

I thank my God always when I remember you in my prayers, because I hear of your love and of the faith that you have toward the Lord Jesus and all the saints, and I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective for the full knowledge of every good thing that is in us for the sake of Christ. For I have derived much joy and comfort from your love, my brother, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you.

And why do I think of these verses as being foundational to what we observe in the book of Philemon? There are several reasons, but one will suffice here: “Accordingly,” the first word in verse 8. It is from verses 4 through 7 that Paul launches his plea to Philemon by saying, “In line with...” or “Because these things are so...” or “Therefore...” It is, in essence, a link between the indicative (or what is) and the imperative (or what then ought to be). Specifically, the indicative is expressed here as the love and faith characteristics of a redeemed people and

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<sup>2</sup> Proverbs 25:11

the imperative, as the strong persuasion by Paul of Philemon to think and act toward Onesimus in a manner that reflects a deep understanding of redemption.

So note with me several points from these verses

### **A Divine Source with Divine Ends**

Who does Paul thank for the faith and love Philemon (& Co.) expresses toward Christ and toward people? He thanks God (v.4). Faith and love are both products of redemption, products of the dead to living, dark to light, slave to free, rebel to worshipper, old to new, transformation. And God is the author of transformation. A second question – Why does Paul pray that Philemon’s sharing of his faith would be effective? He prays this for the “sake of Christ” (v.6) Paul’s is not aiming for a community that is happy in itself, that revels in its own ability to self-regulate and get along, he is praying for a community that exists for the glory of Christ himself! It is important that we do not mistake the world’s pursuits for “community” with the biblical pursuit of community... What exactly, then, empowers a gospel community to live in a way that is permeated by an understanding of their redeemed state?

### **The 360° Effects of Redemption**

It is clear from these verses that Philemon and the others at the church in Colosse<sup>3</sup> are known for their expression of faith and love. Paul not only states that he has heard of it (v.4), but also that he has benefited from it himself, indirectly (v.7). This love and faith is directed first at Christ, and then at saints, and are inseparable (v.5).<sup>4</sup> In verse 6, Paul prays specifically that Philemon’s “sharing” of his “faith” would be “effective for the full knowledge of every good thing that is in us...” The “sharing” here is the Greek word we are familiar with “koinonea.” So we are not necessarily talking about an evangelistic sharing of faith here, but rather a horizontal expression of belief in the promises of God in the gospel community of the redeemed. This horizontal expression of faith, then, fosters an environment in which we, believers, are challenged to become all that we are in Christ – that is, the ever-growing evidence of every good thing that is in us. Here is a beautiful truth of body life: **It is God’s intentional design to use his imperfect saints to do his perfect work of perfecting his people.** We’ll return to this truth in a few moments, but notice the “side effects,” if you will, of the body life of a redeemed people. Paul derives joy, comfort, and the hearts of saints are refreshed. I wonder, do we, in reflecting on the whole of our experience at Clearcreek, consider it to be one of joy, comfort, and refreshment?

So let’s transition now to observing the practical working out of redemption in the gospel community.

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<sup>3</sup> The church at Colosse is commended for these same qualities by Paul in Colossians 1:4

<sup>4</sup> 1 Corinthians 13, Galatians 5:6, James 2

## **A Redeemed Community Shares the Gospel**

Let's think about it... Paul had likely never been to Colosse. It seems he did have some previous relationship with Philemon because he appears to be the one who communicated the gospel to Philemon (vv. 17-20). But there is little reason to suspect that Paul had any idea who Onesimus, one of Philemon's slaves, was. The link may have been via Epaphras, the missionary likely responsible for starting the church in Colosse – whatever the case, there was a providential encounter between Paul and Onesimus and it is quite clear that Paul told Onesimus the good news (v. 10), just as he had Philemon. When you are under stress, things are difficult, resources are scarce, perhaps you are even in jail, how likely are you to share the gospel with someone you've never met before? Or how likely are you to extend yourself into intentionally developing a new relationship for the express purpose of sharing and showing Christ to someone? May I hazard a guess? Not very. I point my finger at you even while there are four pointing back at me. We here at Clearcreek tend to be gluttons. We have royal feasts from Sunday to Sunday, but we then hoard what we've been given throughout the week.

How does this contrast with the mindset of Paul? In Acts 20 at Ephesus Paul tells the elders as he leaves, "But I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God." In 2 Timothy 4 Paul is penning his last words, his final epistle, he charges Timothy "to preach the word...do the work of an evangelist...for I am already being poured out as a drink offering..." Paul spent his entire self, drained himself dry, in service of Christ. Is that what you intend to do? While intelligently sharing the gospel, planned evangelism, winsomeness, and appropriateness, are all important – at some point we simply must ask ourselves: Do we truly believe that there is no better news than the good news? And if so, why on earth would we withhold it?

I fail frequently in this area. As a church, we are not a model of evangelistic impulse. Programs are not at the root of the problem. Something else is. And each individual must determine what that is for them selves. For Paul, proclaiming the gospel was, at its root, simply an overflow of his heart: loving God and loving people – the first and second greatest commandments. Pretty basic. God help us to do the work of his kingdom.

## **A Redeemed Community Values Relationships**

Epaphras, Tychicus, Onesimus, Aristarchus, Mark, Barnabus, Justus, Luke, Demas, Archippus, Philemon, Paul, and Apphia. What is this list? These are all the names directly mentioned by Paul in the two letters that went to the Church in Colosse, what we refer to as the books of Colossians and Philemon. No less than 13 names all interwoven together in the tapestry of the church. All playing different roles, yet all working toward the same goal. Epaphras is sent as a missionary by the church to start a church. Philemon and Apphia house the church. Archippus leads the church. Onesimus runs from the church as a useless unbeliever. Paul, in chains, puts Onesimus out of chains, spiritual chains, by preaching Christ to him and sends him back to the church as a useful believer. Mark, a believer, also runs from the church. Barnabus pursues Mark for the sake of the church and as a result, Mark is restored to the church. Demas abandons the church completely. Luke faithfully serves and chronicles the

early history of the church. Epaphras and Aristarchus both suffer with Paul in prison for the church. We could go further and list out all the different places that these individuals were from. We could list out all the different names that are recorded in the New Testament as servants of the church.

The point is, in a redeemed community, people matter. And people derive their “mattering” if you will, from Christ. Christ died for your brother, Christ died for your sister, Christ died for the church. If you say Christ matters to you, then his brothers and sisters, seated at his right hand, will also matter to you.<sup>5</sup> I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but there are no one-person churches. Nevertheless, there are those of you who act as if you are the only person in the church. You come in Sunday morning with your head down, leave Sunday evening with your head still down, and spend Monday through Saturday as if the church does not exist. Christians who live this way, should double check their credentials for the apostle John does not leave you much room for explaining when he says, “Whoever says he is in the light and hates his brother, is still in the darkness. Whoever loves his brother abides in the light and in him there is no cause for stumbling” (1 John 2:9-10). We must be in loving pursuit of each other in relationship, this is not only an evidence of our salvation, it is how the work of the church gets done, as we noted at the outset in reading the passage from Ephesians 4.

God has blessed us richly in this area at Clearcreek – yet there is still more to be done. Relationships to be started, to be maintained, to be mended, and to be infused with intentionality. As a brief word of encouragement, pull up a mental image of a family or an individual in our midst who seems to be on the fringes. Will you commit to having them in your home in the next two weeks?

## **A Redeemed Community Does Not Eat its Young**

In nursing, we are often critiqued that we eat our young. That is, the old battle axes hold it at the level of conviction that young nurses must “serve their time in the trenches.” Allowing the young nurse to crash and burn is a past time of some of my older colleagues. In the church, we should never find such behavior. What can we observe from the story of Philemon and Onesimus that instructs us in our response to the new believer?

### **Love the New Believer as you Would the Old Believer (v.17)**

Here’s how Paul says it to Philemon, “So if you consider me your partner, receive him as you would receive me” (v.17). This certainly does not need any interpretation. Onesimus is just as much of a new creation as Paul. Onesimus is just as saved as Paul. Onesimus is just as much a child of God, seated in the heavenlies, as Paul. If we fail to treat a new believer as any other believer, with all the love, encouragement, and entitlements of the old believer. we not only fail grievously at an interpersonal level, we fail grievously at a theological level. Certainly the Scripture warns against putting new believers into leadership, and that leaders must be “tested” and testing takes time<sup>6</sup> – but this has nothing to do with

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<sup>5</sup> See 1 John, John 13:35

<sup>6</sup> 1 Timothy 3

justification, but rather humility and the maturing that takes place over the course of a believer's life. Embrace the new believer. And what should our embrace look like?

### **Enfold & Train the New Believer**

Listen as I read Colossians 4:7-9, Tychicus (the letter carrier) will tell you all about my activities. He is a beloved brother and faithful minister and fellow servant in the Lord. I have sent him to you for this very purpose, that you many know how we are and that he may encourage your hearts, and with him Onesimus, our faithful and beloved brother, who is one of you. They will tell you of everything that has taken place here. Just imagine the surprise in the minds of the Colossians when they heard the name Onesimus! It is hard to say how Tychicus allowed this to play out when he arrived in Colosse. Maybe he had Onesimus wait at a nearby coffee shop until he had time to deliver both letters, maybe Onesimus physical appearance had changed so much that he was not recognized, or maybe they simply walked right into the middle of a service in Philemon's home. We don't know, but what we do know is that the language used to consistently describe Onesimus is full of love, acceptance, and takes every opportunity to establish Onesimus' credibility – consider all the references to Onesimus side by side: our faithful and beloved brother, who is one of you (Col. 4:9); I appeal to you for my child (v. 10); but now he is indeed useful to you and me (v.11); sending my very heart (v. 12); glad to keep him with me (v. 13); as a beloved brother (v. 15); receive him as you would me (v.17); and I will repay it (v.19) referring to Onesimus debt. Do we deal with this type of graciousness toward new believers here?

There is also a training aspect to this enfolding of the new believer. Note that Paul states that Onesimus had become like his child and he refers to himself as Onesimus' father. I think there is little doubt that a) some time had passed before Paul sent Onesimus back and b) Paul had used this time to teach and train Onesimus – which would simply be what he both did with Timothy and instructed Timothy to do with others.<sup>7</sup> How do we as a church do in this area? Well, it is hard to say. Why? For the reasons I mentioned earlier. As a church, we have not excelled in evangelism. That is not to say there are no recent converts – we have those who are babies in the faith among us right now and we praise God for that. And, we also have our children, who are by God's grace repenting and we praise him for that. On that note that we have a number of sermons coming up on Child evangelism and baptism...

### **Respond Biblically, Generously, and Sacrificially to the New Believer's Past**

Lastly under this heading, a redeemed community does not eat its young, we should observe that new believers, just like old believers, have baggage, histories, pasts, and a multitude of sins. I don't want to belabor this issue, but I do want to speak very clearly to it. Those established in their faith are to respond biblically, generously, and sacrificially to the new believer's past. Why do I say this? Let's be clear about the scenario in Philemon. Onesimus is a criminal, subject to harsh punishment, even death, under the law. Not unlike a modern day child molester, pornographer, drunk who has maimed others with his

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<sup>7</sup> 1 Timothy 4: 6-16

driving, embezzler, devil worshipper, thief, burglar, compulsive liar, and the list could go on. What if Kenneth Lay, as a converted man, came to our church? How about Mark Foley? Floyd Landis? Paris Hilton? Beloved, we need to be poised to biblically, generously, and sacrificially deal with such situations where public sin is involved. Why? Quite simply because God has dealt with us. It is of God's family, even many of his children in *this* church, that Paul says, "And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified, in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God."<sup>8</sup>

Practically applying this means we will not pretend someone's past does not exist. In fact, where necessary and wise, we will lovingly support the new believer in confronting his or her past when reconciliation, reparation, and repair are required because of sins previously committed. We will not leave the new believer alone to deal with their past. Why was Tychicus traveling with Onesimus? Surely, at least in part, to make sure Onesimus did not abandon the narrow path – which led back to Philemon, in whose hands Onesimus very life was held! We will not allow the new believer to sink under the weight of dealing with his or her past. Where possible, we will do all that is necessary, even empty our wallets, to help new believers practice godliness in their new lives. Lastly, we will not allow the cloud or fog of a new believer's past sins to hang over them in a way that constrains or restrains the normative expression of love from the body to the new believer. Nor will we deny a new believer any of the privileges of body life because of past sins.

Suppose a recently converted drunkard begins regularly attending our church, in time he becomes a member and is exhibiting fruits of the Holy Spirit. Suppose we serve a simple table wine for our communion. Do we deny this man communion? Absolutely not. We may sit Tychicus down next to him during the communion service, and we may even prepare a cup of grape juice for him, but we do not withhold a right of the kingdom from one of the King's children. That's an easy one. What about the new believer who has been labeled by the state as a sex offender? Will you have him to your home for Sunday afternoon dinner? Will you regularly spend time with him? Will you discuss and pray with him about his temptations? Will you teach your children a biblical view of him? Again, in wisdom, Tychicus may be involved. Not presenting oneself for sin as an instrument of unrighteousness<sup>9</sup> will indeed be consciously and systematically be seen to by the individual and those in the body. However, the deeper question lie not in *how* Philemon and the church will plan to help Onesimus, but rather *if* they can see him as God sees him and then act in accord.

Do you know how radical this is? How impossible it is? How can it happen? At least one very clear and practical answer to that question can be found in observing Philemon, and with this we'll close.

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<sup>8</sup> 1 Corinthians 6:9-11

<sup>9</sup> Romans 6:13ff



## **A Redeemed Community Boldly Challenges Each Other to Godliness**

Put yourself into Onesimus' shoes for a moment and hear these words: Slaves [Onesimus], obey in everything those who are your earthly masters, not by way of eye-service, as people pleasers, but with sincerity of heart, fearing the Lord. Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men, knowing from the Lord that you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ. For the wrongdoer will be paid back for the wrong he has done and there is no partiality. That is Colossians 3:22-25. Colossians is the letter that arrived with the letter to Philemon. It would probably have been one of the first apostolic letters that Onesimus had been exposed to as a new believer. Think Paul had Onesimus in mind when he wrote it? Remember that prior to his conversion, Paul quipped on Onesimus name, reminding Philemon of his uselessness before he ran away. Now put yourself in Philemon's shoes: Masters, treat your slaves justly and fairly, knowing that you also have a Master in heaven. I am...sending my very heart. [You] have him back forever, no longer as a slave but more than a slave, as a beloved brother...receive him as you would receive me...Yes brother, I want some benefit from you in the Lord. Refresh my heart in Christ (Colossians 3:25ff., Philemon 12, 16, 17, 20).

Paul is putting forth very bold challenges to godliness. One cannot miss the carefully worded, yet clearly and compellingly stated, "requests" that Paul makes of Philemon. As a redeemed community, we ought to be in the business of persuading, compelling, appealing, confronting, and calling each other to courageous acts of obedience. There is a very real sense in which the Christian life is not for the faint of heart! We must be an emboldened community who live in a manner – and now we've come full circle – which allows the sharing of our faith to become effective for the full knowledge of every good thing that is in us for the sake of Christ (Philemon 6). Paul's not all talk – he tells Philemon to do the right thing and in the very same breath, he demonstrates his willingness to sacrifice himself in order that the right thing may be done – he'll pay for the cost of Onesimus' offenses (Philemon 18). There is much, much, more here that could be said, the least of which is not how close the parallels are between Philemon and the parable of the prodigal son. But we must close.

Returning to our earlier make believe story, would you (A member's name) challenge (member's name) to take the employee back? Would John Street offer to pay for Mark's losses? Would you church come together to pay for the losses? Do we regularly boldly challenge each other to godliness? You see Beloved, God is calling us to much, much, more than what we are doing. We at Clearcreek are not done. We have not arrived. We still have a long, long, way to go. We must give up our silly preoccupations with the things of this world and follow ever harder after Christ. Paul's benediction to Philemon is brief, but it captures fully the essence of what Philemon must have, to do and be, what Paul has called him to: The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit (Philemon 25).