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Pondering Christ in Philemon

TRANSCRIPT (AUTO-GENERATED)

Well, hello, and welcome to Ponder by NorthernLife. We're having a conversation about the Word of the Lord, as it was preached to us on Sundays, and as we encounter it in our everyday lives. My name is Jack.

I'm joined today by Ben and Jono. Tristan are still away today. And today, we are talking about Ben's sermon Christ in Philemon.

Now, Ben, coming to Philemon, any interesting thoughts or facts or revelations that occurred to you as you were sort of studying and preparing for this sermon?

The answer is no, which is interesting in itself, that I had always considered Philemon, that weird short letter at the end of Paul, that doesn't have much, many memory verses.

I'd read, I've read Philemon, because I've read through the whole Bible, but probably hadn't come back to Philemon.

But this week, last week, spending a week studying Philemon, I was so blessed by this short letter, Paul's shortest letter, but by no means his least explosive.

Such kind of rich theology and application to the real kind of Roman dynamic of a household and the interaction with the kingdom. So that's not a new fact, but I was just blessed in coming back to this short letter.

Yeah, it is a cool little punchy, punchy letter with lots of interesting sort of thoughts when you think about a Christian approach to slavery and how the gospel reframes that sort of relationship.

Do you want to give us a recap of the content of your sermon and what that was about?

I looked at Philemon through the lens of house rules, which is economy, economics is house rules, and how in Philemon you see the clash of two kind of economies, the Roman economy, Roman house rules and kingdom economy.

And Paul writes the letter to Philemon to ask him to receive the runaway slave Onesimus back into his household. And so in the sermon, we worked through the whole letter, which was cool.

It's short enough that you can read the whole thing, with three points. In the new economy of the kingdom, we partner in faith, we appeal in love, and we embody the cross.

And so for us followers of Jesus, we are called to live in the new economy of the kingdom, which reframes the way that we relate to each other.

Yeah, so starting with this idea of koinonia partnership, and you talked about all the different types of koinonia we could have with people.

And obviously, the kingdom has that the church is this great koinonia of God, this fellowship, this commonness of God.

I'm thinking about Anesimus and Philemon, and let's say Philemon does what Paul asks him to do, and sets Anesimus free and forgives the debt. And they're living in a church together now.

I can't help but feel that there would be some awkwardness in that sort of relationship.

And I guess I wondered if you had tips for how can we partner with people who we might not naturally get along with, or who might grind our gears in certain ways. I mean, the church, praise be to God, the church has got all sorts of people in it.

And that comes with friction sometimes. I guess I wondered, what are your tips for partnering with people who may be not a natural fit for us?

I think there's a very good sociological answer and theological answer.

And both of them are captured in that long story that I told in the sermon, the Robbers Cave experiment, that when people focus on how they're different, it breeds tribalism, kind of us versus them mentality.

But as soon as you establish a deeper identity across boundaries, it brings people together.

And so Paul has that like earth shattering line in Galatians 3.28, that in Christ, there is neither male nor female, slave nor free, Jew nor Gentile, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

He's taking three of the biggest, most prevalent distinctions between human beings and saying they are not definitive identities anymore, for you are all one in Christ. And so that just brings people together.

I love our church, that you look out, and we are so diverse, culturally, ethnically, in all sorts of different ways. We are really different from each other.

And if we focused on the differences, we would separate, and we'd have, you know, those types of people on this side of the room and those types in this side. But the fact is, we are one in Christ. We have a deeper identity, and that brings unity.

And the second thing is the greater mission, that when people are out for themselves, serving their own goals, it breeds conflict, because your win is my loss, and so we are enemies of each other.

But what the kingdom gives us in the new economy is a greater mission to give our lives for. And so, you know, I think absolutely you're right.

Philemon and Onesimus, if Philemon did receive Onesimus into his household, there would have been some kind of conflict and something there, but that's why Paul says, remember your partnership, your koinonia, that you are in Christ, brothers, on the

same level, and also you have a greater mission that should unite you together. So sociologically and theologically, I think that's where unity comes from. Long answer.

Hey, that was a good long, comprehensive answer. That's true, I guess, like the... It's where we put our emphasis and our focus.

There's an element of choice, I guess you're saying, in terms of how I relate to someone. Am I going to emphasize? Am I going to choose to focus on the differences?

Or am I going to choose to focus that we are brothers and sisters in Christ?

If I may continue monologuing for a moment, Virginia made an interesting comment before we hit record of the way that identity works in our modern world, that we live in what Carl Truman calls expressive individualism, where in our society, I get to

define who I am sexually or vocationally or whatever kind of identity, I get to say who I am. And that kind of breeds this division and discord and factionalism in our culture today. But in the Gospel, it's like, no, I am not my own.

I was bought at a price. I am in Christ, and that is the deepest thing about me. And that kind of gives us this unity.

So it's kind of an interesting reflection on the ways that we today build our identity on what we want to build our identity on and the mission that we want to build our lives on. The Gospel compels us to a deeper identity and a greater mission.

Yeah, hearing you unpack it makes it very clear that Philemon is an archetype of the Gospel, isn't it? It's a heavy hitter.

I think you should try to take that talk, which when you were presenting it, I was in a different spot in the room, and I felt like you were sort of at multiple times thinking I'm preaching better than you're responding. Is that what you felt?

Possibly.

Because it's a cracking message, and I think it's worth putting it into a sort of a different format. It's almost printing it. Like, it's epic.

It's actually... And I didn't probably appreciate it as much hearing it, but looking at my notes and hearing you unpack it. Yeah, partnering in faith, appealing in love, embodying the cross are the main points.

But yeah, it's pretty... Do you think that it's actually bigger? It's the smallest book that Paul wrote, but it's really significant.

Like as a parable for the gospel, like how do you beat that?

It's the gospel lived out in a really practical way.

Philemon, if you can't take, on Esimus' back, you have not worked out the gospel. You have not heard a few of Jesus' parables about merciful servants and people with power using their power well.

It's really worth hanging out for a bit longer as a book.

Well, that last point brings me to my second question, which is about, Ben, you talked about this, this contrast between appealing in love, which is what Paul does to Philemon versus, you know, ordering someone to do something.

And you said that most of the time, with exceptions, the Christian approach is to appeal in love. Now, we don't know the outcome of Philemon and Esimus' saga, although you had that really cool hint from Ignatius' letters.

But I wondered, how do we respond when our appeals in love are rejected? Especially if they're about big things. I mean, Paul's request is quite significant for Esimus, at least.

Hypothetically, if Philemon didn't respond, how do we, how should we respond to that? How should we, yeah, what do you think?

That has to be part of why Paul appeals in love. The fact that Philemon could have said no, and that's okay, he's allowed to say no. That's such a crucial part of appealing in love.

I'm allowed to ask, and you're allowed to say no. And that is okay. And we can live, and we can be reconciled even still.

Now, sometimes you hear a no for a really big hard question, and it's not easy to say it is well. But I mean, that line, it is well with my soul. Horatio Spafford wrote that hymn.

He wrote the hymn on a boat in the ocean, traveling from Europe to America, over the place where his four daughters were drowned in a shipwreck. He wrote those words. So it's like some of the most profound suffering that a human could experience.

But Horatio Spafford discovered that if you have Christ, you can say that it is well with my soul. And so when you ask a big question and the answer comes back no, whether from God or from another person, we can say it is well with my soul.

Dallas Willard used to say that this is one of the most challenging sentences to hold on to. This universe is a perfectly safe place to be. Just a good thing to think about, because we have all these objections.

But what about? It's like, well, just think about it. Think about the God revealed in Jesus and think about whether this universe is a safe, perfectly safe place for me to be.

It's a good question.

I think when we appeal in love, I think of a few words starting with P. You continue to pray and you ask God to help you with patience, and you consider petition in prayer, not to the person, but in prayer to the Lord.

But it's just how the kingdom works, appealing in love, the art of the request, and then trusting the person will be convicted or respond in an appropriate way.

But sometimes they make the wrong choice, and so I think we do need to pray and be patient, and at times petition, because out of love, we make our appeal again and again in love through the Father.

And as you were saying that, it strikes me that to appeal in love is actually a very courageous action.

You know, it's very safe if you have the power to order someone around, but it's actually a really courageous thing to put yourself in a place where someone could say no.

I think of Anissimus now, I mean, presumably, he chose to go back to his former master's home with this letter from Paul.

That's a very brave thing for him to do, because he's putting him, it's a relational act almost, in putting himself somewhat or his desires in the power of someone else.

It's interesting that the power and the appeal goes both ways, like you're saying, Paul appealed in love to Philemon, did he appeal in love to Onesimus as well?

Because Paul could have said, I'm the apostle, go back to your master, no matter what happens. I just can't believe that the guy who wrote the letter that Onesimus carried would have ordered Onesimus to do that.

I think it's probably likely that Paul reasoned on the basis of the gospel. He appealed in love to Onesimus to go and return and be reconciled to your master, just as he appeals in love to Philemon to be reconciled to the slave.

Like it goes both ways.

What struck me too was the strong language that Paul uses about his relationship with Onesimus. My heart, I think he calls him. I hope, Philemon, you will realize what a great guy this man is, but just the strength of being a brother.

He just loved him. And probably, as you said, he's sending him back to make right, to make amends. And that's coming from Paul's love for Onesimus.

Kind of following on from this train of thought we've been thinking about.

Ben, your third point was living the cross and the way that Paul sort of takes the costs and debt of Onesimus onto himself and says, charge it to me, Philemon. You know, he basically, yeah, he takes it on behalf of another.

I was thinking this sort of, when we do this in our everyday lives, this kind of comes at a cost to us, obviously. And thinking about that cost, I wonder how do we navigate it?

I mean, because when Paul says to Philemon, you know, anything he's done, I'll pay for. I mean, Philemon could easily exploit that if he wanted to, and say up the amount of gold, he could hold it over Paul.

And so there's always a bit of risk in absorbing cost. And not that we should avoid that at all. But I wonder, I wonder how do we approach that?

Do we absorb it all? Do we set limits on this is what I will bear for another person, but no more?

That's a very hard question. I don't know if we could give general advice. It would have to be specific to the situation.

Because Jesus does say, turn the other cheek. You know, don't resist an evil person. If they force you to go one mile, go with them two miles.

Jesus says, don't forgive seven times, but 70 times, seven times. But that doesn't mean, to use a specific example, that a woman in an abusive marriage has to stay with that person and constantly forgive.

And so there has to be wisdom to know how that applies. But in general, we embody the cross following our savior who asks us to carry the cross.

And we pray for wisdom and we seek wisdom in community as to how that big idea applies in our specific situation. So I'm really hesitant to give a one size fits all rule.

Yeah, that's very wise.

All right, I've got a question from a listener, from Patrick Ross, who has asked about Philemon being the smallest. He says, how is the order of Paul's letters decided? Is there a reason the shortest letter is at the end?

Yeah, it seems like Paul's letters are arranged in terms of length.

I don't know why that is the choice, but that is the ordering from Romans, which is his longest, to 1 and 2 Corinthians, and then the smaller letters. I don't know why, but that is the arrangement.

And the orderings, I would presume, change throughout history.

Potentially. I don't think the order of the New Testament epistles is very significant for their theology or their reasoning. The ordering of the Old Testament, I think, is more significant, narrative, narratologically.

And it has also changed more.

The ordering of the Old Testament has changed more than the New Testament.

It was fun yesterday that we had the shortest letter of Paul and the longest letter of Paul together.

Paul's book ends. Well, I think that will bring us to our palate cleanser question. Again, compliments of Patrick Ross.

This week's one that I want to pick from his list is what would you do if you saw an alien? Alien zaps down in front of you. What are you going to do?

I probably put my index finger out and try and say ET and have a moment like that.

See if that alien has seen the movie ET.

Yeah. That's what I would do. I'd say, have you heard about the creator of the universe?

Yes.

Come on.

Preach the gospel to him.

Yeah. Yeah.

You got to know. He has reconciled all things in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and on every planet. That's cool.

You, Jack?

Same thing as Jono.

Preach the gospel. No, no. I don't know.

I'd probably... Start speaking in tongues and I'll... Call the police.

All right. Well, that's enough of that. Thank you all for listening.

Thank you guys for coming on to Discuss, and we will catch you next week. Bye bye.