

Living the Shared Life

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[0:00] Our scripture reading for this morning is found in the book of Philemon. Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy, our brother.!

To Philemon, our dear friend and fellow worker. I pray that you may be active in sharing your faith so that you will have a full understanding of every good thing we have in Christ.

Your love has given me great joy and encouragement because you, my brother, have refreshed the hearts of the saints. Therefore, although in Christ I could be bold and order you to do what you ought to, ought to do, yet I appeal to you on the basis of love.

I then, as Paul, an old man now, and now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus, I appeal to you for my son, Onesimus, who became my son while I was in chains.

Formerly he was useless to you, but now he has become useful both to you and to me. I am sending him, who is my very heart, back to you.

[1:30] I would have liked to keep him 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, so that any favor you do will be spontaneous and not forced.

Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back for good, no longer as a slave, but better than a slave as a dear brother.

He is very dear to me, but even dearer to you, both as a man and as a brother in the Lord. So if you consider me a partner, welcome him as you would welcome me.

If he has done you any wrong or owes you anything, charge it to me. I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand. I will pay it back, not to mention that you owe me your very self.

I do wish, brother, that I may have some benefit from you in the Lord. Refresh my heart in Christ.

Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I ask.

[2:40] And one thing more, prepare a guest room for me, because I hope to be restored to you in answer to your prayers. Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends you greetings, and so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke, my fellow workers.

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Remember that time you were at that family gathering?

Maybe it was a wedding? And then they showed up. And your heart sank into your shoes.

You said, what are they doing here? After what they did. After what they did to me. And in that moment, all that pain and all that anger, and it boiled up.

And the temperature in the room dropped 10 degrees. And then they saw you. And there was that awkward moment where you both knew that you saw each other.

[3:50] And they started walking in your direction. That's what it was like one Sunday morning in Colossae.

It was a normal morning. Philemon and his wife, Apphia, were up early. They straightened up the courtyard in their home. And Archippus, their son, greeted people at the door.

And then he came in. Onesimus. Onesimus had been Philemon's slave. He had been, at least until he ran off and on his way out stole Philemon's stuff.

Philemon trusted Onesimus, and that made the betrayal all the more painful. But you know that pain.

We all know that pain. A child gone away. Brothers and sisters, barely on speaking terms. Once close relationships in a church, now silence and fear.

[4:59] Marriage and trouble. Broken relationships. Onesimus came in. A broken relationship.

Slapped Philemon in the face that morning. But clutched in Onesimus' hands was a letter. A letter from the Apostle Paul.

And it's that letter that you have in front of you, open in your lap, I hope. And in this letter of Philemon, Paul shows us how the gospel heals relationships. How the gospel can heal relationships. It's intensely practical. Because this intersects our lives, doesn't it? Broken relationships is the stuff of which our lives are made. But at the same time, it's good news. It's good news in the world of broken relationships. Philemon holds out hope.

[5 : 58] Holds out hope for this dark world where relationships crumble all the time. I think it's something that we all need to hear, doesn't it? Sounds like that.

So over the next three weeks, we're going to look at this book. This morning, we're just going to look at the first seven verses. Here, Paul lays the foundation. He's going to get to the broken relationship, but that's not until verse 8.

And in verse 8, he says, Therefore, based on what I've said so far, I appeal to you for my son, the son who became my son while I was in prison, I appeal to you for Onesimus.

But first, he puts that appeal into context. He wants to get Philemon thinking along the right lines. And so that's what we're going to be looking at today. In these first seven verses, he's subtly reminding Philemon that he's not a man to himself.

He's not just a private man. He's not living a private religion. He's living in fellowship with an entire community, with the rest of the gospel community.

[7 : 09] And that means privileges, and that means responsibilities. And so, in these first seven verses, these first seven verses teach us that actively living that shared life, that fellowship and community, that prepares us to heal relationships.

That prepares us to deal with things when those people walk in the door, those people walk into our lives, or there's that constant tension. Living the shared life prepares you, puts you in the place to heal relationships.

That's what we're going to see. That's the main lesson. So how does it prepare you? How does living in fellowship prepare you? We see three things in these first seven verses. First, it gives you identity.

Second, it opens you up to others. It opens up your heart to others. And third, it gives you power. So first, the shared life gives you identity.

Identity. It tells you who you are. So just look with me at the first couple of verses. And listen to how Paul identifies people. And this helps Philemon, and it helps us to start thinking about ourselves in the proper, see ourselves in the proper way.

[8 : 29] So in the first couple of verses, Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy, our brother. To Philemon, our dear friend and fellow worker.

To Apphia, our sister. And then two more times in this letter, Paul refers to Philemon as his brother. His brother.

That's how Paul thinks of him. And that's how Philemon, that's how Paul wants Philemon to think about himself. I don't think I need to tell you, but maybe I do need to remind you that the word brother, that title, that identification, is the most common name for Christian in the Bible.

A hundred and thirty times, just in the Pauline epistles, I didn't count the other ones, but a hundred and thirty times, Paul says, brothers. My brothers.

Your brothers. The brothers. Is that how you think? That's how Paul thought. Paul didn't see people unattached. He saw family.

[9 : 35] And so what is your identity? Well, you're part of a family. You're part of a family. You're family. We're family. And those aren't just words we say. That's what Jesus has made us when he saved us.

It's not something that we just call ourselves. It's who we are because of who. What Jesus has done and what God the Father has done when he adopted us. We are family. And so that means we work together.

Philemon is his dear friend and fellow worker. We're all in the family business. Growing the kingdom of Christ. We're all in this together.

We all have the same goal. We work together. And then we fight together. Because our family business is not a tame one. It's not a tame business at all. It's militant.

And Paul says, and to Archippus, our fellow soldier. Now, before anyone ever said, I may never march in the infantry, ride in the cavalry, shoot the artillery.

[10 : 35] I may never do any of those things, but I'm in the Lord's army. Yes, sir. Before anyone saying that, Archippus was in the Lord's army. And you are too.

We're all on the same side. Sometimes we forget that. We're all on the same side. We're all in this together.

Isn't that good? But that means you and your life has an effect on the rest of the family.

That's true at your house, right? There's that saying. We never say it at my house. But there is that saying, if mama ain't happy, nobody, ain't nobody happy.

But that's not just true about mama. That's true about anyone. That's what it's like in a family. The one affects the all. And that's why Paul does this very surprising thing at the end of verse 2.

[11 : 39] He brings in the whole church at the end of verse 2. So he's writing to Philemon and to Apphia and to Archippus. That makes sense. But then to the church and to the church that meets in your house.

Now, isn't that interesting? This is a sensitive issue. Paul's dealing with it. We know the issue. I've had it read to you. The broken relationship.

The sin. The need for Philemon to forgive. Those are personal matters. They're personal. They're private. But Paul invites that whole church into the situation.

Paul refuses to do what we so often do. And that's separate and divorce who we are as individuals and who we are in community. To think that our Christianity is our own private affair.

But Christianity is not a private religion. It's just not. Christianity is the witness of a new community. Of the new community.

[12 : 46] Of the redeemed. There's no divorcing what we do in private and then who we are. Who we are in private and then who we are in the church. Your personal relationship with Christ affects the whole church.

Because we're a family. That's how families work. And so what Philemon chooses to do with Onesimus is going to affect the whole church.

And so Paul invites the whole church in on the matter. He's going to have them oversee. Now, that's the first point.

Seeing identity in a family, as family members, puts you in the proper frame to heal relationships.

Paul wants Philemon to start seeing himself as a man in a community.

A man in a family. You have to see yourself as connected to the whole. Because sin, your personal sin, your lack of forgiveness when someone sins against you, is going to send ripples through the entire pond.

[13 : 57] Because we're all in the same pond together. Now, remember, we're asking the question, how does living the shared life, living as a family, living in fellowship, prepare us to heal relationships?

So first we saw it gives us our identity. Now secondly, it opens us up to others. It opens us up to others. That's the verses 4 and 5. Paul illustrates.

He shows Philemon his heart. He shows what's on his heart. In verses 4 and 5. I always thank my God as I remember you in my prayers, because I hear about your faith in the Lord Jesus, and your love for all the saints.

Paul didn't just pray for himself. He didn't just pray for himself.

His prayer, his arms of prayer, stretch hundreds of miles from a Roman prison. Didn't he have the right to feel sorry for himself if anyone did?

[14 : 59] And to be praying just for himself if anyone did? But again and again, we see his arms of prayer stretch across the Mediterranean. They stretch all the way right into Philemon's house.

He's saying, Philemon, I think about you. I'm wide open to you. I'm so thankful that your heart is open to all the saints. It's so encouraging to see how you love all the saints.

I'm so thankful for what God is doing in your life. He's giving you faith. Faith is a gift from God. I'm so thankful. And he's giving you love. Praise God for that.

Now, how does Philemon's love demonstrate itself, illustrate itself? How does his open heart show itself? Well, in hospitality, he's the deacon of the building.

Now, Bill, he had a harder job than you did because his house was the building. Can you imagine that kind of sacrifice?

[16 : 03] But for Philemon, it's no trouble. Love makes it easy. And love always makes it easier in the family of God to serve one another.

And so do you see what Paul is illustrating and then what he's commending? He's so thankful for and he's encouraging Philemon to keep on. Living the shared life opens us up to others. It makes us expose ourselves. And Paul invited Philemon into his prayer closet. He said, listen to how I pray for you. My heart's wide open to you.

I love you, brother. And Philemon's heart is open. He invites people into his home. So this is a family where people really care about each other.

I'm so thankful, Grace Fellowship Church, that I can say that about you. This is a family that really cares about each other. Their hearts are not closed but open.

[17:08] Amen. And just as a lesson along the way, our prayer lives, like Paul's, should reflect that open heart. And that's why I would encourage you, brothers, all of you, to come to Wednesday night prayer meeting.

I know it's not possible for some of you, but you are missing out on so much love if you're not here. If you're not praying with God's people.

Because on Wednesday night, that's our night, we gather together and we share concerns. We share burdens. We share our difficulties. We share our praises.

And then the wonderful thing is, is our brothers and sisters, then they pray for us. And you know how loved you feel when you hear your brother praying for you.

Well, we need that. I can't tell you how many times, how many times, someone has come up to me after a Wednesday night prayer meeting and said, You know what? I was really wanting to skip tonight.

[18:15] It's tired. It's hard. It's hard being here. But I am so glad that I came. I needed that. But praying together does more than that.

It gives us a chance to feel love, but it also gives us a chance to then love in return. It's not a one-way street. When we pray for others, it opens up our hearts to them.

Prayer is not only a reflection of an open heart. Prayer has a way of prying open a closed heart. Did you know that? If you're having troubles with someone in the church, and you're having a hard time loving them, one of the best ways to get over that is to start praying for them.

It opens up our hearts to each other. And it takes us out of ourselves and our concerns and our small, narrow-minded worlds that we can trap ourselves in.

We have a great way of taking hammers and nails and building ourselves a coffin. A coffin of our own selfishness.

[19:28] Where all we see is me and mine and my concerns and my problems. And it's hard to breathe in a coffin of your own selfishness.

But when you pray, it tears that coffin apart. It opens up our hearts. And now we're ready to deal with broken relationships.

It's impossible to deal with a broken relationship when you're closed off and you're suffocating in the heat of your own selfish misery. And all the great injustice is done to you. When you're thinking about others, though, now you're ready.

Now you have the fortitude and the grace and the strength then to deal with broken relationships.

But when you're consumed with yourself, dealing with broken relationships, dealing with a Philemon or an Onesimus that walks into your family gathering, dealing with a child or a spouse or a church member, that's impossible when you're closed down, closed in.

But living together, really living together, puts you in the place to heal broken relationships. Now third, that's the second.

[20:42] It opens us up. Sharing together opens us up. Now third, the shared life gives you power. It gives you power. See, it takes more than knowing who you are.

It takes more than having your heart opened to deal with broken relationships. We need power. We need resources. And verse 6 says, living that shared life is the key to enjoying those things, to understanding everything that we have in Christ.

Now, to be honest, we have some work to do on this verse, in verse 6. And so first, I'm going to read it as I have it in the NIV, and then we're going to talk about it.

But so, stick with me. This is a hard part. So I'm hoping you're standing up to the occasion. Now what does that sound like Paul wants us to do?

That he's praying for Philemon to do? It sounds like he wants Philemon to evangelize. To witness.

[22:00] Right? Share your faith. Be active in sharing your faith. Evangelize so you can understand what we have in Christ. But unfortunately, in this case, the NIV has missed the boat.

It's a very difficult text. It's a very difficult text in the original, but pretty much everyone agrees that that's not the best way of translating it.

Even the later NIV committee, when they came back and they revised the NIV, they thought, we have to change this verse. It's not done properly.

So I'm going to read for you what the new translation is. And I think this is a better translation. It gets to the point of what Paul is after. And so I'm going to read it through two times.

I wish I would have thought to put it up here, but I didn't. I pray. This is how it goes. 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.

[23:12] So let me just read that again. I pray that your partnership with us in the faith. That's the key idea. 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.

Evangelism doesn't really fit the context here. Evangelism is not, doesn't really fit. But living together, partnership in the faith, partnership with us in the faith, that is what Philemon is all about. Philemon is all, the book of Philemon is all about healing broken relationships. Of healing and restoring people back to where they were. And that's what this verse is about.

And so he's not talking about sharing your faith as it's in the NIV as we have it. It's partnership in the faith. So like a business has, business partners, they have, there's a partnership in the business. Each business partner has a piece of the business. Everyone has a stake. Everyone has a piece of ownership, if you will. And that's what Paul is getting at.

[24:29] He's saying, Philemon. Let me just put it in my own words. He's saying, Philemon, I pray that as you experience the partnership with us, as you experience fellowship with us, that that fellowship would empower you to understand everything, every good thing we have in Christ.

Now, Paul's not just praying that Philemon's faith might be effective and powerful. He's praying that the fellowship, our fellowship in the faith might be effective.

See, again, we're used to thinking about faith as a private thing. But again, Paul is refusing to divorce the individual from the community.

See, we're all sitting down at the same table. But do you see what Paul is saying? This is so profound and this is so important.

Yes. Yes. You have every good thing in Christ. That's true. By faith, when we are joined to Jesus, we get all the riches of Jesus.

[25:45] Yes, you have all of those in Christ. But this is what is so profound about what he's saying in verse 6. How much you understand. How much you understand and experience and are able to live on all those riches depends on how you're living with your brothers and sisters.

Paul's way of thinking and understanding and living the Christian life is not someone off by themselves. But someone who's living in a family.

It depends on how you're living with your brothers and sisters. So picture, picture a gigantic table. A gigantic, one of those long, long tables, you know, you see in a castle where 50 people could sit.

Now, and that table is full of Thanksgiving dinner. Everything you could want is on that table. Turkey and mashed potatoes and sweet potatoes and rolls.

It's all there. Can you see it? But it's just you sitting at that table. Just you in your seat by yourself.

[27:01] Now, what are you going to be able to reach? What are you going to be able to get onto your plate? Sitting where you are.

Well, just maybe one thing. Just maybe the sweet potatoes right in front of you. But the turkey is way down there. And the green beans are way down there.

And you can't reach them. What do you need? You need other people at the table, don't you? And you need to have them passing that food around. See, when everyone's there, when everyone's sharing and passing the food, then you enjoy more of the dinner.

You enjoy more of what's on the table. And besides that, who wants to eat Thanksgiving all alone? Isn't it the company that makes dinner so sweet?

When someone are saying, here, try this. Oh, this is so good. Try this. That's what makes Thanksgiving great. That's what makes the food taste so good.

[28:06] And that's what Paul is praying. Brother, brother, I pray that you would be living that shared life, enjoying the fellowship in the gospel, because he wants Philemon to experience the world.

He wants him to understand how much good he has in Jesus. And he can't do it by himself. He needs the whole family sitting at the table. Now, he wants them to know the power of it in his life. Not just up here. See, you can get it up here by yourself.

You and your Bible by yourself, you can get it up here. But to really experience it and understand the power of it in your life, you have to have people.

So how do you get from head knowledge to life to experience to power? The answer is fellowship. The answer is partnership in the faith. I pray that your partnership with us in the faith might be effective in deepening your understanding of everything, every good thing we share in Christ.

[29:21] So it's as we live together, it's as we live together, that we understand all the blessings of Christ. It's when we're living with sinners. It's when we're living in the middle of broken relationships and having to deal with those and heal those.

That's where you learn power. That's when you experience grace to change. See, you don't need a lot of grace all by yourself. But live with a sinner?

Live with 200 sinners? Be a sinner? Then you need grace. Then you see the sweetness of what Jesus has given to us.

Grace to humble yourself when you've sinned. Grace to forgive when they've sinned against you. It's in the middle of hard relationships that you learn just how good and sufficient Jesus Christ is. It's in the middle of that hard first year of marriage when you have to die to yourself that you learn how good it was that Jesus died for you.

[30:29] It's in the middle of that difficult parent-child relationship when it seems like the love is a one-way street that you begin to experience how good it is that Jesus loves you even when you don't love him in return.

And it's in the middle of living at Grace Fellowship Church with sinners just like you, with people who don't live up to your expectations, who disappoint you, who fail you, who sin against you, and then you in turn sin against them.

It's in all that mess that we really start to enjoy what we have in Jesus. See, we want things neat and clean, don't we?

We want things... We want to go off to some sterile spiritual laboratory somewhere with bright lights and stainless steel tables and white coats, and we want to grow and mature.

But here's the spiritual laboratory, brothers and sisters. Here it is. And it's here where we grow.

[31:47] God's instruments for growing you are sitting right behind you. And they're sitting right beside you and in front of you. And God has a beautiful and a wonderful way of making that mess that is our church, that is our lives, come out to something beautiful.

And it's when we're living in that that we really see how good and how rich we are in Christ. So, I have a question. Are you living the shared life or are you living the secluded life?

Now, you can be here and still be living the secluded life. I'll tell you how you do it. You don't talk to your brothers and sisters about how you're doing spiritually. You don't pray for your brothers and sisters you don't ask about them.

You don't talk to them. You go outside and you talk about whatever else you want to talk about out there. But you keep your faith private. You can be here and be living a secluded spiritual life.

So, are you living a secluded life? Are you living a shared life? Well, if you're a member of Grace Fellowship Church, and I understand a lot of you are not, but I just want to talk for a second to the members of Grace Fellowship.

[33:05] I want to remind you that you promised to live a shared life. You promised to. You said you would when you joined the church.

You took a vow to that end. The fourth commitment every member makes when joining Grace Fellowship Church in part says this, the members must actively seek to cultivate acquaintance with one another so that they may be better able to pray for one another, love, comfort, and encourage one another, and help one another materially as necessity may require.

Living the shared life is something that you promised to do. And I would just urge you to take your commitment seriously. It's something we all need to work on.

None of us have arrived. I certainly haven't. But that's the direction that we need to go. And verse 6 says, if you do, then you're going to gain a full understanding of every good thing that you have in Christ.

It's going to benefit you personally. But then verse 7 says, others will benefit as well. Philemon had been doing this. He'd been opening his heart. He loves the saints. He's opening his house.

[34 : 27] And Paul says, your love has given me great joy and encouragement because you, brother, have refreshed the hearts of the saints.

So who did Philemon bless as he lived in love, as he lived this shared life that Paul was pointing to and urging him to? Continue on. Continue on. He blessed Paul and then he blessed all the saints. See, Philemon had this, had a ministry of refreshment. And that's a beautiful ministry. That's a ministry that any of you could have.

You don't have to ask a pastor. You don't have to run it by the elders. You don't have to talk to the deacons about setting up a ministry of refreshment. Just be here.

Be here. Share your life with the saints. Open up to them. Love them. Pray with them. Pray for them. And you don't have to have great talents to do that.

[35 : 31] You don't have to have great abilities. You just have to love the family that you're in. And when you do, what happens?

I think verse 7 is this beautiful picture of life. Joy, encouragement, refreshment.

Isn't that life? That's what we want life to be. this place becomes an oasis in the desert when we are loving one another.

And isn't that what the world is missing? Isn't that what the world is missing? If you've never come to Christ, then perhaps you are already seeing how dark it is out there, out in the world.

There's no love out there. There's selfish love that I'll love you if you love me. I'll love you if it's good for me.

[36 : 38] I'll love you if you take care of me. Selfishness rules the world. Selfishness defines the world. And then there's a singer in 1965.

She's saying, what the world needs now is love, sweet love. That's the one thing there's just too little of. They want it.

They need it. But it's not out there. It's not out there. The community of love is the community of Christ.

Christ founded this community in a loving act of giving of himself. He said, not my will, but your will be done.

And he said, Father, I'll do whatever it takes to save them. I'll lay down my life for them. Community of love is the community of Christ.

[37 : 41] It's the family of God. God. And so, I just want to talk for a moment to you. If you're outside of Jesus, if you've never repented, I just want to ask, are you tired of sinning?

Tired of being lonely? Tired of feeling guilty? Tired of feeling like, you know what? No one understands. You're not going to find an answer out there.

You're just not. Thousands of years of history have proven me right. There's no answer out there, but the answer comes when you come to Christ.

See, he's the door into the family of God. And when you come to him, your sins are forgiven.

They're done away with. They're washed away.

And then you are brought into the family of God. He laid down his life so that sinners could come back into the family of God.

[38 : 48] And so, don't stay outside. Don't stay away when there's life to be had. Don't stay away when there's a promise that, you know what? I'm going to set the lonely in families.

That was God's intention in salvation. I'm going to make lonely people happy people in families.

That's a gospel promise. And it comes true when you believe in Jesus Christ.

It comes true for you. And so, I just want to encourage you. Life out there, life on your own, it's a lonely, dark world.

And you're going to have a lonely, dark life. But it doesn't have to be that way. Simply believing the promise, turning from that life and turning to Jesus, and you'll come into the family of God and your sins will be washed away.

Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we thank you that you have loved us when we are certainly so unlovely.

[40 : 02] And any beauty that we have is a borrowed beauty from Jesus. We thank you that you have robed us in his righteousness. And now you don't see us as naked before you with our sin, but you've taken our sin and you've thrown it far away.

And you have brought us into your family and there is not a single day of our lives that you don't show your fatherly love for your children. And we thank you that the gospel doors are wide open, that whosoever shall come and will come, they'll be received.

We thank you that the gospel doors are still open. And I pray that you would move the lonely and the wicked and the needy and the desperate.

Move them to see just how glorious Jesus Christ is and how good the gospel is and how good everything you have promised, how good it all is.

Pray that you would give us as your children spiritual eyes to see one another as brothers and sisters, as fellow workers and fellow soldiers that we would not see and view anyone earthly, in an earthly way anymore, but as they are in Christ, teach us, change our hearts, show us the way that we should walk, and then give us grace to walk in it.

[41 : 37] Oh Lord, give what you command, and then command whatever you want. Hear us and help us for Jesus' sake. Amen.