THE GOSPEL PROJECT FOR STUDENTS

GOD'S PRISONER | SESSION 6

GRACE TO A RUNAWAY SLAVE

Philemon 1:8-22

The Point: God calls us to live as peacemakers who reflect the heart of Christ.

HIS STORY

Paul Appealed to Philemon in Love

When Paul wrote his letter to Philemon, about two-thirds of people in the Roman Empire were slaves. These men and women were enslaved in many ways and for many reasons. Shipwrecked sailors became slaves, prisoners of defeated cities became slaves, even celebrated war heroes became slaves (often forced into gladiatorial combat). Beyond that, anyone in the Roman Empire could voluntarily indenture himself to a master and become a slave. Some became enslaved to pay off debts or generate revenue. Highly educated slaves were often used as school teachers for small children in Roman families.

Organizing a slave revolt in Colossae wasn't on the apostle's agenda. After all, Rome was masterful at neutralizing uprisings. Instead of changing the world from the outside in, the gospel would change the world from the inside out. Paul understood from personal experience that only when the gospel gets to the source of the sin—the heart—can it enter the bloodstream and circulate throughout the entire body. This inside-out strategy is far more effective in changing individuals, families, churches, cities, nations, and civilizations. Paul understood that reconciliation with Onesimus had to begin in Philemon's heart.

- **How do we sometimes try to change the world or ourselves from the outside in, instead of the inside out?**

Philemon Needed to Accept Onesimus as a Brother, Not as a Slave

The apostle Paul didn't believe in accidents; he believed in providence. Even in difficult situations like the fragile relationship between Philemon and Onesimus, Paul caught a glimpse of God's providential hand at work.

Paul Anticipated Grace from Philemon

The language Paul used about Onesimus wronging Philemon is subtle. We don't know how Onesimus wronged him. Maybe the slave lied about his whereabouts, hurt someone in his grand escape, or perhaps stole some of his master's money to cover his travel expenses. We don't know the crime, but Paul probably knew. Onesimus probably confessed his sins in explicit detail. However, whatever wrong he committed, Paul invited Philemon to take inventory of the situation by considering what he truly lost. What might he truly gain by extending the love and grace Paul was demonstrating? Even more importantly, what would he gain by showing the love and grace Christ had shown him?

Essential Doctrines

Family Relationships: *God has ordained the family as the foundational institution of human society. It is composed of persons related to one another by marriage, blood, or adoption. Marriage is the uniting of one man and one woman in covenant commitment for a lifetime. It is God's unique gift to reveal the union between Christ and His church and to provide for the man and the woman in marriage the framework for intimate companionship, the channel of sexual expression according to biblical standards (Heb. 13:4), and the means for procreation of the human race. The husband and wife are of equal worth before God, since both are created in God's image. The marriage relationship models the way God relates to His people. A husband is to love his wife as Christ loved the church. He has the God-given responsibility to provide for, protect, and lead his family. A wife is to submit herself graciously to the servant leadership of her husband even as the church willingly submits to the headship of Christ. She, being in the image of God as is her husband and thus equal to him, has the God-given responsibility to respect her husband and to serve as his helper in managing the household and nurturing the next generation (Eph. 5:22-33; 1 Pet. 3:1-7). Children, from the moment of conception, are a blessing and heritage from the Lord. Parents are to demonstrate to their children God's pattern for marriage. Parents are to teach their children spiritual and moral values and to lead them, through consistent lifestyle example and loving discipline, to make choices based on biblical truth (Deut. 6:4-9). Children are to honor and obey their parents (Eph. 6.1-3).*

Leader Note: *Because some content from the Personal Study Guide will not be available on the One Sheet, make sure to adapt the session based on how you use the material with your group.*

YOUR STORY

- **Reflect on what Joseph told his brothers in Genesis 50:20. What similarities exist between Joseph's slavery in Egypt and Onesimus' escape to Rome?**
- **What difficult experiences in your life has God used for your good and His glory?**
- **How should our identity as children of God and siblings of Christ shape the way we live each day?**
- **Often, it's not what we say that gets us in trouble; it's how we say it. Paul was careful how he addressed Philemon. How does our digital culture make it challenging to be careful with our words?**

YOUR MISSION

Head

Paul never saw the inside of Philemon's guest room. The Romans beheaded him before he could book his travel. But Jesus prepared a better room for Paul—and it wasn't for guests. Jesus once promised His disciples that He was leaving to prepare a place for them (and for us) (John 14:3). Not even the most luxurious, five star, all-inclusive bed and breakfast in Colossae could compete with the heavenly home Jesus prepares for His children.

- **How does Jesus' promise of a future home make the troubles of life seem less stressful?**
- **Do you consider Jesus' promises as something to look forward to? Why or why not?**

Heart

Like Paul said to Philemon, love should be our motivation for obeying God in all things. We can easily fall into the trap of obeying God mainly out of obligation. We obey because we have to. We know we should. While this is certainly true—God has given us commands, not suggestions in Scripture—obligation cannot be what prompts our obedience. Instead, love must be what encourages our obedience. Jesus said that one way we love Him is by keeping His commands (John 14:15). Love fuels obedience; obedience verifies love. A steady diet of love leads to a healthy lifestyle of obedience, but obligation will starve it at some point.

- **Why do you think obedience from love is greater than obedience from obligation?**
- **What should we do if we find ourselves obeying more from obligation than from a heart of love and devotion to God?**

Hands

Like Paul, you and I can afford to cover each other's expenses because Jesus Christ has covered our expenses. At the cross, Christ paid in blood for the greatest transaction in human history—our debts for His death. Jesus picked up the tab of our transgressions and purchased our freedom on Calvary. Because we have experienced and anticipate such grace, we should extend it freely to others.

- **How have you seen God use your brokenness or someone else's to give grace?**
- **What are some ways we can be wronged that are difficult to respond to with grace? How should we respond when that feeling arises?**