

Philemon

SPEAKER	Matt Ryniker
DATE	Sunday, July 7, 2024
PASSAGES	Philemon; 1 Timothy 1; Luke 6; Luke 11; Galatians 3
MESSAGE	Begins at 1:21:16 in the service

THE BIG IDEA

Christianity's answer to a wicked institution was never a longer list of prohibitions. It was a transformed heart, one person at a time. In twenty-five verses Paul stands between a runaway slave and the man he ran from, asks for a brother to be received where a piece of property left, and offers to pay the difference out of his own account. That is exactly what Jesus does with us.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- ◆ Two things are true at once: professing Christians held slaves, and it was Christian nations that first fought the practice as a moral evil rather than an inconvenience. The contrast between them is the question the sermon is actually asking.
- ◆ Matt's caution came before his argument: the measure we use against others is the one used on us. If people in our own history were blind to their own depravity, we are not immune to the same blindness.
- ◆ "Just because you see an event in the Bible doesn't mean that was God's preference." Scripture records what happened and trusts the reader to tell a hero from a warning.
- ◆ Paul lists enslavers among the lawless in 1 Timothy 1 — "hardly a ringing endorsement for slavery." The law is genuinely useful. It is just not sufficient.
- ◆ Luke 6:30–31 does more damage to slavery than a ban would. It is positive rather than negative, it goes at the heart rather than the statute, and it survives translation into any culture and any century.

- ◆ Paul never commands Philemon. He appeals — and then leans: old man, prisoner for Christ, you owe me your very self, and by the way, prepare a guest room.
- ◆ The letter turns on one word: *brother*. A sibling relationship in Christ does not soften the earthly division, it replaces it.
- ◆ Onesimus could not pay, could not speak for himself, and could not make it right. Someone from outside had to intercede. That is the whole gospel in one man's errand.

► 1:21:16

Matt is midway through what he is calling a tour of tiny texts, and as tiny texts go, Philemon is about as small as they come — no chapters, just verses. “Don’t worry about the clock,” he told the room. Then he told them to prepare their hearts anyway, because he was about to spend a Sunday morning on Christians, Christianity and slavery. “I’ll botch it. It’s okay, it’s gonna be fine. I’m gonna do my best, but I’m not gonna say it the way that maybe you hope I do.”

Why the subject makes a room tense

► 1:22:39

The tension, Matt said, is that this is part of our political battlefield. One side raises it as a pointed attack: a Christianized nation practiced slavery, and a cruel form of it — nothing like the indentured service an Israelite could enter with an end date and a purpose. The implied argument is that talking a Christian talk grants no immunity from that kind of darkness. The other side answers, also correctly, that slavery was ubiquitous across nearly every major culture in history, and that it was rare for anyone to oppose it as a *moral* matter — and the people who did were Christians.

► 1:24:12

Both points hold, and holding both at once is what puts the real question in the foreground: what exactly is the difference? Why do some Christianized people practice a wicked thing while others, transformed by Christ, fight to the death to end it? That is a case study in what actually transforms a society.

Two profiles

► 1:25:15

Matt drew the two ends of the spectrum and admitted up front they were cartoonish, because nobody is cleanly one or the other — and because the measure you use in judgment will be measured back to you. At one end, the mundane: people who will dabble in Bible talk and use spiritual language but are driven by the desires of the flesh, eager to maintain the broken systems around them, indistinguishable from the world. At the other, people so transformed by the gospel that they filled their vision with Christ's expectations even when it cost them family, friends and blood.

“The danger is if there were many in our own history who lived and acted just like that, but weren't quite aware of just how dark their deeds were, then it stands to reason that we could be doing the same” — which, as he put it, is a gut punch if you accept the logic of it.

Three men, three very different positions

► 1:27:32

Paul writes from jail, imprisoned for preaching Christ — a former rising rabbinic scholar. Philemon is free to roam about the cabin: comfortable, probably Gentile, an acquaintance of Paul's who hosts a church in his house. Onesimus is a runaway, and a runaway slave in ancient Rome had essentially no rights. The play was to reach a large city far from home, assume a new persona, and keep looking over your shoulder; if you were caught or returned, you could expect a terrible beating or worse.

► 1:29:28

Two of the three are not free, and Matt sat on the parallel. Paul is restricted by a cell. Onesimus, having found Christ, is being sent back to the one place he fled. “Can you imagine being Onesimus? I'm gonna carry this back to Philemon. Like where I ran away from, that's where you want me to go?” Watching Paul dictate the letter, wondering: I don't know, Paul — is this going to work? We parted on terrible terms.

“I wish the Bible opposed slavery harder”

► 1:30:37

Matt distinguished two groups who say that. To the ones who mean it sincerely, he offered a reading principle: seeing an event in the Bible does not mean God endorsed it. David and Bathsheba is in there because it happened, not because it went well. The authors assume a reader capable of nuance — sometimes capable of finishing a story unsure there was a hero in it at all.

► 1:31:31

The second group he named concern trolls: people who wear your colors and sit on your bench and spend the whole game airing their doubts. For them, a text.

“Now we know that the law is good, if one uses it lawfully, understanding this, that the law is not laid down for the just but for the lawless and disobedient, for the ungodly and sinners, for the unholy and profane... for murderers, the sexually immoral, men who practice homosexuality, enslavers, liars, perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to sound doctrine.”

1 TIMOTHY 1:8–10 ↗

► 1:33:33

The examples are incidental; the point is that the law is useful, not for your kind neighbor but for the lawless. Still, one of those examples is *enslavers* — the Greek word means people-stealer, for the purpose of selling them or working them. “Hardly a ringing endorsement for slavery,” Matt said. “I don’t know how you could have a slave trade without enslaving.” Then he reached for something with far more reach than a prohibition.

“Give to everyone who begs from you, and from one who takes away your goods do not demand them back. And as you wish that others would do to you, do so to them.”

LUKE 6:30–31 ↗

► 1:34:39

Three things about it. It goes at the heart, not the statute. It is stated positively, which Matt argued is genuinely alien to us — in our godless moments we lose our creativity entirely, and our whole politics becomes a list of what we are against. “It doesn’t take a prophet to see what’s wrong with the world around you. It takes real, genuine creativity to articulate what that bright, beautiful tomorrow should be.” And it transcends translation: any language, any era, any culture understands it, and is challenged by it.

► 1:36:35

Then the reason a ban alone is not enough. Jesus describes a strong man overcome and stripped of his armor — and then what happens to the house.

“When the unclean spirit has gone out of a person, it passes through waterless places seeking rest, and finding none it says, ‘I will return to my house from which I came.’ And when it comes, it finds the house swept and put in order. Then it goes and brings seven other spirits more evil than itself, and they enter and dwell there. And the last state of that person is worse than the first.”

LUKE 11:24–26 ↗

Combating a society’s ills works for a time. But if nothing takes the place of what was driven out, the demons come back, and they bring friends.

The letter

► 1:38:25

Philemon 1–3 opens with a prisoner writing to a beloved fellow worker and to the church in his house. Paul is about to confront Philemon with a task, and it will get forceful — but Philemon is a brother, not a nail to Paul’s hammer, and the whole relationship is governed by their common relationship to Christ. The thanksgiving in verses 4–7 is real: Philemon loves Jesus and refreshes the saints, his slaveholding notwithstanding. We are never told how he treated Onesimus, or what sent him running.

► 1:41:18

Then the ask. Verses 8–10: though bold enough in Christ to command, Paul appeals — as an old man, and now a prisoner also for Christ Jesus, for my child Onesimus, whose father I became in my imprisonment. Matt enjoyed how thickly it is laid on. “Just to remind you, I’m Paul. In case you forgot who wrote this letter from verses ago, I’m Paul, and an old man, and I’m in jail for Christ.” He is appealing instead of commanding, while dropping the hint that he could command.

► 1:42:39

In verses 11–14 Paul puns on the man’s name — Onesimus means *handy*, and formerly he was useless — then says he is sending back his very heart, and would gladly have kept him. That is not a throwaway. Ancient jails supplied no meals; you ate what your friends and relatives carried in, and your jailers were content to let you sit. Onesimus at Paul’s side would have been Philemon serving Paul by proxy, and to Philemon’s credit. Paul lets him picture it, then sends the man home anyway, so that Philemon’s goodness would not be by compulsion.

► 1:45:13

“For this perhaps is why he was parted from you for a while, that you might have him back forever, no longer as a bondservant but more than a bondservant, as a beloved brother — especially to me, but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord.”

PHILEMON 15–16 ↗

Matt worked the grammar. How is a man both no longer a bondservant and more than a bondservant? Because all three phrases point at one thing: *beloved brother*. He will no longer be a slave because what he actually is, is a sibling. And a sibling relationship in Christ does not soften an earthly division. It replaces it.

► 1:46:33

“So if you consider me your partner, receive him as you would receive me. If he has wronged you at all, or owes you anything, charge that to my account. I, Paul, write this with my own hand: I will repay it — to say nothing of your owing me even your own self.”

PHILEMON 17–19 ↗

► 1:47:45

Receive him as you would receive me is a bigger sentence than it looks. If the apostle Paul came to town you would not put him in the guest room; you would move into the guest room, feed him, and host a stream of strangers for however long the meetings ran, and be glad to. As for the debt — runaways usually left with something stolen to fund a long and dangerous journey. What account Paul means is anyone’s guess. Matt’s reading: “Look, dude, I’ll cover it.” And then the closing squeeze in [verses 21–22](#) — confident of your obedience, knowing you will do even more than I say; at the same time, prepare a guest room for me. Hypothetical proximity, deployed on purpose. It is much harder to refuse a man who has announced he is coming. [Verses 23–25](#) sign off with the greetings of fellow prisoners and fellow workers.

Neither slave nor free

► 1:51:36

“For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”

GALATIANS 3:27-28 ↗

What the New Testament hands us is not a society's new charter with revised terms and an expanded list of dos and don'ts issued each generation. It is the ability of Jesus Christ to transform any culture you can name, person by person — supplanting its sicknesses, in a phrase Matt borrowed and liked, with the virus of his love. Messy and slow, and you may wish God would simply send in the heavenly tanks. But the prize is not a new world order. It is you, made a new creature.

What Paul is doing is what Jesus does

► 1:53:43

Onesimus was helpless, deeply in debt, and had no standing to speak on his own behalf. Paul speaks for him, puts himself physically between the runaway and the master, insists on brotherhood, and tells Philemon to charge the bank of heaven for everything owed. “We, like Onesimus, are pitiful, indebted creatures,” Matt said — lost, astray, run away, unable to make right what we have done to our neighbors, so far down that we require someone from outside and from a higher place.

► 1:54:29

He guarded the point against overreach: this is not the only way Jesus transforms a nation. Sometimes the dos and don'ts of the law come into play, and sometimes you call 911. But the change that lasts, the one that takes a society from dark to beautiful, runs person to person.

► 1:55:33

Which turned the message back on the room. If people in the past were blind to their own ills, we may be too — so the place to go is the source. “In him, service to him is freedom. Obeying him is transformation, and letting him do his work, what only he could do, on the inside of you where no one else has access, that is exactly what you need.” And the objection he expected, he headed off: you know the whole time that you do not deserve it. “Don't block him out by saying, oh no, I don't deserve it. Let's just settle that. No, you don't, okay? Move on, next step, let him anyway.”

FOR FURTHER STUDY**SCRIPTURE IN THIS MESSAGE**

- [Matthew 7:2](#)
- [2 Samuel 11](#)
- [1 Timothy 1:8–10](#)
- [Luke 6:30–31](#)
- [Luke 11:24–26](#)
- [Philemon 1–3](#)
- [Philemon 4–7](#)
- [Philemon 8–10](#)
- [Philemon 11–14](#)
- [Philemon 15–16](#)
- [Philemon 17–19](#)
- [Philemon 21–22](#)
- [Philemon 23–25](#)
- [Galatians 3:27–28](#)

FOR YOUR HOPE GROUP

1. Matt described two profiles — the person who uses spiritual language while living by the desires of the flesh, and the person whose vision of everyone around them is dominated by what Jesus has done in their own life. Where do you actually sit, and what evidence would you point to?
2. He argued that we lack creativity: we can name what we are against far faster than we can describe the beautiful tomorrow we are for. What are you for, said positively, in the argument that costs you the most?
3. Luke 11 warns about a house swept clean and left empty. What have you driven out of your life without putting anything in its place, and how has that gone?
4. Paul insists on brother where the culture said property. Is there a relationship where you are still working from the old category — employee, in-law, opponent — rather than sibling in Christ?
5. Onesimus had to walk back to the one place he had run from. What is the walk back you have been avoiding, and what would it take to start it this week?

ABOUT THE SPEAKER

Matt Ryniker is Hope Chapel's senior pastor — his own description of the job — and reports to the church's governing board, who he cheerfully calls his boss. He and his wife Mandy have been held up from Hope's own pulpit as an example to the congregation. He spent a stretch of his working life as a public school teacher, and he still teaches the parent dedication classes where families commit to raising their children to follow Jesus — a theme that runs straight into this message.

Watch the full message:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=clFy_YXni2s&t=4876s

These notes summarise a message preached at Hope Chapel in Austin, Texas. They are a reader's aid, not a transcript — scripture references link to the full passage so you can read it in context.