

Risky Grace Philemon

Loving God, still our minds and quiet our worries; open our ears and hearts so that we might truly hear your Word. Amen.

I. Introduction

A. Last in our series on grace

- Recap series so far
- Focus has been on the activity of God's grace in our lives and in the world
- This week God invites us to become partners in the sharing of grace and mercy in the world
- We are actually going to read an entire book of the Bible, which as it happens is only 25 verses long

B. I think we should change the name of this book to The Letter Concerning Onesimus rather than Philemon, to whom it is addressed

- At the center of the story
- **Read Philemon 1-9:** Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother,

To Philemon our dear friend and co-worker, ² to Apphia our sister, to Archippus our fellow soldier, and to the church in your house:

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

⁴When I remember you in my prayers, I always thank my God ⁵because I hear of your love for all the saints and your faith toward the Lord Jesus. ⁶I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective when you perceive all the good that we may do for Christ. ⁷I have indeed received much joy and encouragement from your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you, my brother.

⁸For this reason, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do your duty, ⁹yet I would rather appeal to you on the basis of love—and I, Paul, do this as an old man, and now also as a prisoner of Christ Jesus.

II. Unpacking the letter

A. Philemon head of a church based in his house

- Others are included others in the greeting, and they appear to be members of the community that meets at Philemon's house
 - Tells us that Philemon is a man of means who has a house large enough to host the church
 - Also tells us that this letter is meant to be read to the community and in community
- It's not a private communication between Paul and Philemon
- But it is a personal letter addressed to one man
 - Greek word "you" used throughout the letter is a singular as opposed to plural
 - the tone Paul uses is very different from other letters
- not an apostle but an old man in prison

B. Taking a Chance

- Paul makes it clear that he is taking a risk in this letter
 - I could command you, he says, knowing he has authority even though he is not physically present
 - Instead, he decides to rely on love and the grace that Philemon experienced in Christ
 - He risks Philemon doing the right thing because of his love for the Lord
 - Not because he is told to do so, which would probably create resentment
 - But, freely, because of the grace he has received
- Most of us probably don't think of grace as being risky, or if we do, we think of the risk as something God takes, not us
 - But, in this letter, Paul shows us that God asks us to take risks on grace too
 - Risks in receiving grace and risks in showing grace
- How much are you willing to risk on grace?

II. Risky Grace

A. Onesimus bore the risk

- **Read Philemon 10-14:** ¹⁰ I am appealing to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I have become during my imprisonment. ¹¹ Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful both to you and to me. ¹² I am sending him, that is, my own heart, back to you. ¹³ I wanted to keep him with me, so that he might be of service to me in your place during my imprisonment for the gospel; ¹⁴ but I preferred to do nothing without your consent, in order that your good deed might be voluntary and not something forced.
- Play on words with “Onesimus”
- Onesimus, traditionally, thought of as a runaway slave
 - Philemon was his owner
 - Onesimus has been caught, which is why he is in prison with Paul
 - Roman punishment for runaway slaves included execution and, if Onesimus had taken anything from Philemon to escape, then you could pretty much guarantee that he ran the risk of crucifixion if he returned to Philemon
- Paul is sending Onesimus back to Philemon, probably bearing the letter
 - Philemon has a right to deal with Onesimus as a runaway slave but Paul asks him to deal with him as a Christian, a fellow brother in Christ
 - receive him back no longer as a slave but more than a slave, a beloved brother...both in the flesh and in the Lord
 - welcome him as you would welcome me
 - welcome him as you would welcome Christ??
- Onesimus runs a HUGE risk in this enterprise
 - Paul risks being disappointed in Philemon
 - Philemon risks being looked at as less than holy
 - Onesimus risks his life
 - Paul might have said, "Oh, I know Philemon, he would never do that."
 - How often have we been surprised by someone we thought to be so kind and gracious?

- Onesimus literally put his whole trust, his very life in God's grace as it would be lived by Philemon

B. God's grace experienced through others

- A cynic might point out that it wasn't God who spared Onesimus, if in fact Philemon did, but a man - Philemon
- but that is true more times than not, isn't it?
 - we experience God's grace in real, concrete ways through other people
 - we extend grace to a hurting world, understanding that we are acting at the behest of God and as God's people
 - That's what feeding the homeless is all about, isn't it?
 - Showing people that someone cares about them
 - Sharing God's amazing grace with them
- Remember how two weeks ago I told you that you should be thankful that your salvation doesn't depend on me?
 - Because I know how graceless I can be
 - I know how judgmental my thoughts can be
- What about you?
 - Would Onesimus have been wise to put his life in your hands?

C. How should Philemon respond?

- **Read Philemon 15-21:** ¹⁵ Perhaps this is the reason he was separated from you for a while, so that you might have him back forever, ¹⁶ no longer as a slave but more than a slave, a beloved brother—especially to me but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord.

¹⁷ So if you consider me your partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. ¹⁸ If he has wronged you in any way, or owes you anything, charge that to my account. ¹⁹ I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand: I will repay it. I say nothing about your owing me even your own self. ²⁰ Yes, brother, let me have this benefit from you in the Lord! Refresh my heart in Christ. ²¹ Confident of your obedience, I am writing to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say.

- Notice that Paul doesn't give Philemon explicit instructions about what he should do
 - He comes close to telling him to set him free, but he stops short
 - This is a tough call for Paul
 - Pretty clear what he wants Philemon NOT to do - punish him as a runaway slave or a thief
 - But a lot harder to tell him what to do
 - Any response has problems
 - How would other slaves react if Onesimus is welcomed, freed, and not punished?
 - What if Philemon and all the other Christian slave owners freed their slaves? Lots of resentment from others?
 - Yet, how can Philemon keep a brother in Christ in slavery?
 - Grace can be tricky, and Paul isn't much help, saying he trusts Philemon will do more than expected, but nothing more explicit
- Knowing grace, sharing grace, isn't always easy or straightforward or without unintended consequences
 - We live in an imperfect world and do not see as God sees
 - For me, I think it is better to err on the side of grace
- Story of the Christian rice farmer and his neighbor stealing water
 - The community helped him show grace
 - Perhaps this is why Paul wrote Philemon a letter meant to be read in community
 - So they could help him decide to show grace and live it out, regardless of the consequences
- What do you think Philemon did?
 - We don't know for sure, but we have a few clues
 - Notice that Paul adds an extra incentive in the letter
 - **Read Philemon 22-25:** ²² One thing more—prepare a guest room for me, for I am hoping through your prayers to be restored to you.

²³ Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends greetings to you, ²⁴ and so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke, my fellow workers.

²⁵ The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.

- Paul expects at some point to visit Philemon, and you can bet that the first thing he'll ask is "Where's my son Onesimus?"
- The letter ends with greetings and a benediction, and we don't have any other letters to or from Philemon
- What happened? Well, there are some clues
- First, Onesimus must have taken a risk and trusted in grace because we have the letter; it got delivered
- Second, I don't think the early church would have preserved the letter if Philemon had handed Onesimus over for execution; bit embarrassing
- Finally, we have a letter from Ignatius, bishop of Antioch, to the church in Ephesus written about 50 years later
 - I have received in God's name your whole congregation in the person of Onesimus, a man of inexpressible love who is also your bishop. I pray that you will love him in accordance with the standard set by Jesus Christ and that all of you will be like him. For blessed is he, who has graciously allowed you, worthy as you are, to have such a bishop: a man of inexpressible love.
 - Was this the same Onesimus?
 - Not sure, but how glorious if it was!
 - What wonderful fruit Philemon's act of grace bore
 - How marvelous that Onesimus was able to trust in God's grace and become a leader among the people of God
- We talk so much about the power of God's grace in our lives
 - The story reminds us that so often that grace comes through someone else
 - And that someone else might be you
 - What would you have done if you were Onesimus? Would you have trusted in God's grace as shown by Philemon?
 - What would you have done if you were in Philemon's shoes? Would you have forgiven Onesimus? Freed him?

- It's easy to think that we would have acted like Paul is so confident Philemon will
 - But it's harder when the one in need is before you and you have the power to be grace in that person's life or not
- There will come a time when you will have that opportunity to embody grace, when God will ask you to take a risk on grace
 - Remember this story of Onesimus and Philemon
 - If you can, seek counsel from the community of faith, as I'm sure Philemon did
 - Listen to the Spirit who will guide you
 - In the end, take a risk on grace and err on the side of mercy