

Tangible Gospel Fellowship: Human Relationships Transformed

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[0 : 00] Paul's letter to Philemon, page 1000 in the Church Bibles. And the message this morning is all about human relationships transformed, about tangible gospel fellowship.

Well, Philemon is another short letter, like Jude, that we're studying in the evening. But again, I think we'll find that there is much more to it than meets the eye. This time it's Paul that's writing, and it is his shortest letter.

That's why it's at the end of the letters of Paul in the New Testament there. And rather unusually, it seems to be to a private individual, about a private matter. At least so it seems at first glance.

In fact, it's actually much more than that. And that's why it's been preserved in our Bibles.

Obviously, it did have a profound effect on Philemon.

And on his relationship with Onesimus, the slave who had returned to his household, who the letter's all about. Because, clearly, it became public knowledge.

[1 : 10] And no doubt at all, the circumstances created by it became a model for the churches. And a very powerful illustration of the real and radical change in relationships at every level that is the fruit of the Christian gospel at work.

So this letter is a little jewel. It's often neglected, but it shines a beautiful light of the liberating effects of the true gospel of grace when it comes to bear in the relationships of everyday life in a fallen world.

That's what it's about. The issue on the surface is that of the return of a slave to his master's house and an appeal for clemency on Paul's behalf.

Now, when I really get to grips with the letter, in terms of the way that Paul writes, and the reasoning he gives for his request, we can see that it begins to take us right to the very heart of what it means to understand the gospel properly at all.

The reality is that in Christ, it's a phrase that appears several times in this letter, in Christ, all the relationships of this world are transformed utterly.

[2 : 36] Because in Christ, all such relationships become reshaped by one supreme relationship of what it means to be in Christ Jesus.

To be found in Christ, that is to be a Christian believer, means that both publicly and privately, personal relationships are restored.

There is a real transformation of broken human relationships. To be in Christ means also that social relationships are remodeled.

There is a real transcending of the social divisions of our broken human society. And to be in Christ also means that the horizons of all earthly relationships are reoriented.

There's a transfiguring of the myopic horizons of our earth-bound thinking, our time-bound thinking, to the things that are above, to the things that are eternal, to the relationships that really matter.

[3 : 42] And it's these things that this letter is all about. Today, we're just going to get acquainted with the general picture of the letter, with the characters involved.

And we're going to look particularly and address this first issue, the first of these relationship transformations. That of the genuine restoration of broken personal relationships that are enabled by the Gospel, that are demanded by the Gospel.

It's what Paul might call tangible Gospel fellowship. It's the sort of faith that you can really see. And faith that can be seen at work, according to the Bible, is real faith.

So first of all then, what's the story behind this letter to Philemon? Well, in verse 1, you'll see that it's clear that Paul's in prison, very probably in Rome. And he's writing from Rome to various churches

to encourage them, to strengthen them.

One such letter is the letter to the Colossians. It's one of Paul's prison epistles. So is Philemon. And almost certainly, the letter of Philemon and Colossians were carried together to the churches of that area, the Lycus Valley, by the hand of Paul's associate in ministry, Tychicus, and by Onesimus himself.

[5 : 03] If you turn back just a few pages to the end of Colossians chapter 4, just before Thessalonians, it's just helpful to see how this fits in. Colossians 4 verse 7.

Paul says, Tychicus will tell you all about my activities. He's a beloved brother, and a faithful minister, and a fellow servant in the Lord. I've sent him to you for this very purpose, that you may know how we are, and that he may encourage your hearts, and with him, Anesimus, our faithful and beloved brother, who is one of you.

Now, the letter to the Colossians was also to be read in some of the other churches of the area, particularly the letter to Laodicea. If you look down Colossians 4 verse 16.

And when this letter has been read among you, have it also read in the churches of the Laodiceans. And see that you also read the letter from Laodicea. Well, we don't know where that letter is. It's never reached the Bible.

And look at verse 17. Say to Archippus, see that you fulfill the ministry that you have received in the Lord. Turn back to Philemon verse 2, and you'll see that Archippus appears there.

[6 : 14] It's very likely that he was actually the leader of the church in neighboring Laodicea, just very close to Colossae. Very probably, in fact, he was Philemon's son, and he was still living in Philemon's household, but ministering in the neighboring town in Laodicea.

Now, underlying this letter to Philemon lie two very, very important events. The first is that Anesimus was one of Philemon's slaves.

You can see that from verse 15 that we read. But some kind of rupture had happened in their relationship. We don't know what it was for sure. Verse 18 may suggest that it had something to do with money, perhaps money being stolen.

We don't know. But at any rate, he left Philemon's employment and his household under a cloud. We're not absolutely certain that he was a runaway slave as such.

We need to understand that slavery in the ancient world wasn't really like the kind of plantation slavery in the Americas that we think about. A third of the population at least were slaves.

[7 : 23] Another third were freed slaves. They largely made up the working people of the ancient world. But slaves could gain property. They could gain wealth. And it wasn't unknown for people to sell themselves into slavery for that purpose.

And sometimes they were treated very well indeed. Not always, of course. So Philemon may have been a fugitive, but I think perhaps it's more likely that there'd been some sort of incident that had put him at odds with his master and left him really in the doghouse.

Maybe he'd lost him money in some business transactions. Maybe he was just generally regarded as rather a hopeless worker. Verse 11, that word about useless and useful seems to be a play on the word anesimus.

Anesimus means useful. Well, maybe his nickname was actually useless. Whatever it was, it seems that deliberately he left the household of Philemon and went all the way to Rome to find Paul.

Because he knew that Paul had a huge influence on his Christian master. And therefore, whatever the upset was, whatever the rift in the relationship, he was hoping that Paul would help him work out the situation with his boss.

[8 : 38] Maybe he thought Paul was a bit of a soft touch and he would just automatically take his side. People think ministers are like that. They think they're soft touches. They think about the vicar on Dad's army and that sort of thing.

Maybe he thought, well, I'll go to him and he'll take my side and everything will be all right. That's what people think. Sometimes they get a surprise. But at any rate, anesimus went off to Rome to find Paul.

And he certainly got more than he bargained for. Paul, as we know, was never one to miss an opportunity. Great to see you, anesimus. Wonderful. Yeah, let's talk about Philemon and that problem later on.

But listen, I've got this new course called Christianity Explored. I'm doing it every day in my house. Come and join in. And that's what happened. And Onesimus found Christ.

And that's the second great event that underlies this letter. It's clear, if you look at verse 10, that Onesimus became what Paul calls my child, my son in the faith.

[9 : 41] Just as Philemon had earlier done. And it seems that Onesimus became an invaluable helper to Paul in his prison ministry. He says, he was useful to me. Verse 13, Paul says, he was very glad indeed to have him with him in Rome, helping him and serving him.

But Paul isn't, of course, a soft touch. And now the time has come for Paul to send Onesimus back to face up to Philemon, to face the music, to sort things out.

In verse 12, he says, literally, it's almost heartbreaking to send back his very heart. But it may be that this occasion of Onesimus going to the church in Colossae and traveling with letters, it may be that that was just a perfect opportunity for Paul to send Philemon, Onesimus back and to get things sorted out.

Although now, the aim was far, far more than just sorting out a problem of employment. It wasn't just a reconciliation between slave and master and a fresh start in the employment.

That's not what he was after. Now it's something far more. It's a true reconciliation as brothers in Christ. Paul wants his long-standing brother Philemon and his new brother Onesimus to be fully and properly at one in Christ, despite everything that had gone on before.

[11 : 12] And clearly, there had been serious issues. people. And therefore, it's the implication of this new situation that makes this letter so important, that makes it so significant for the church, both in Paul's day and in our own.

It's all about what it means in real-life relationships for the gospel of Jesus Christ to come into situation and to change things, because it's changed people.

Now there are, of course, lots of questions that we can't answer for certain about this letter. What is Paul asking Philemon to do exactly? Is he expecting Philemon to free Onesimus, to emancipate him fully?

Well, there seem to be hints in that direction in verse 14 and in verse 21 where he talks about the goodness that Philemon was going to do, doing perhaps even more than I'm suggesting.

Well, it may be. Does Paul want Philemon to send Onesimus back to Rome so he can continue serving him? Quite a few scholars say, no, that can't be right.

[12 : 23] They imply that verse 15 is against that because it says you'll have Onesimus back forever. I don't think that's right. I think what Paul's talking about there is that he'll be forever a brother.

He's talking about something that's going to be eternal. He's talking about much more than Philemon's, Onesimus' place of service. He's talking about something that's going to be true forever.

I think actually Paul is wanting Onesimus to be back with him in Rome. I think verse 13 is a pretty strong hint at that, don't you think? You see verse 13?

I would have been glad to keep him with me in order he might serve me on your behalf. That's a pretty strong hint. But actually it is just a hint because Paul is determined that he only wants that if Philemon fully and freely will send Onesimus back because everything has been restored.

Either way really the place of Philemon's, of Onesimus' service is quite secondary. What Paul really wants, what he wants above Paul, is a real reconciliation between these men.

[13 : 36] Not just in employment terms but as brothers in Christ. What he wants above all is that their relationship should be all that it should be as brothers in Christ.

And some of us know just how tough that can be in the world of real life business and commerce dealing with other brothers in Christ. Christ. And Paul says this isn't something that can be commanded or forced.

It's something that needs a change of heart especially in this man Philemon. And that can only come by a work of the grace of God in the heart that comes through a real grasp of the gospel. The gospel that is first about a new relationship with God himself in Christ for every believer and therefore which must mean new relationships with others with others that we now share fellowship with Christ.

And Paul's point is that where the gospel has done real work, where faith is real fellowship will be real. It will be tangible gospel fellowship because in Christ is a miracle that can and that does and

that must transform broken human relationships and restore them in new and wonderful ways.
[15 : 04] In a way that's real, that's visible for people to see in the church and by the world. And so Paul's first focus on this letter is on Philemon himself and on his thinking.

He's concerned about Anesimus, yes, he's concerned about Anesimus' reception, but not just that. It's not just that he wants Philemon to do the right thing by Anesimus and send him back to Paul. No, that wouldn't be enough. Paul wants Philemon to grow in grace. He wants him to rise to this challenge to his faith. He wants him to rise to the challenge for his faith so that it becomes more mature, more complete as he deals with this.

And that's why he writes the way that he does. Not with compulsion. The verse 8 is clear. He could. He could command him. But rather, he wants to apply the gospel to the situation so that Philemon will see that it's the gospel of Jesus Christ that is the real authority in shaping his thinking, shaping his behaviour.

It's when we understand the gospel more fully, always, that we see and understand the real response that we need to make to a situation in life.

[16 : 21] And it's when we understand the gospel more fully that we're enabled to make that right response. Because only grace can change the human heart.

Law and legislation has no positive power, does it? We know that. It's love alone that can really transform relationships through changed hearts. That's why our government has such a difficulty, isn't it?

Government has a terrible time because you can't legislate for good behaviour. You can slap asbaws on people, but that can't create good manners, it can't create civility.

Of course it can't. The best that it can do is restrain the very worst of the bad. But love can. Faith at work through the love shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Spirit, that can transform relationships, that can transform them forever.

Real, tangible, gospel, fellowship in the form of transformed and restored relationships. That's the real evidence that faith and love is at work, that the gospel is at work in somebody's life and in a fellowship.

[17 : 34] And that's why Paul prays first of all in this letter, as he does, for the real and tangible fellowship that he's speaking about to be uppermost in Philemon's mind. That's really what the prayer in verses 4 to 7 is all about.

So we're going to spend the rest of the time this morning thinking about why these transformed relationships that Paul speaks about, this real tangible fellowship, is so important.

First of all, it's vital for the whole church's well-being. Second, it's vital for Philemon's own personal spiritual well-being and growth.

And third, it is vital because it is an expression of the basic response to the Christian gospel. So first, transformed personal relationships are vital for the well-being of the whole Christian congregation.

The health of the whole church really is at stake when there are relationships between individual believers in a fellowship that are not as they ought to be. There's no such thing as a purely personal and private matter in the Christian church.

[18 : 46] No such thing as a private, personal dispute. It affects the whole church. Well, that's basic, obviously, to the whole idea of New Testament Christianity.

The church is a body. If one part of it is unhealthy, every part is affected. And that's so evident in practice, isn't it? I had a correspondence just this week from somebody in another Christian church where there are two or three bitter relationships and the whole church is suffering.

But it's also very, very clear right here in this letter to Philemon because although at first it seems to be a private letter, in fact, it's just like all of Paul's other letters to the churches.

He begins it in verse 1 just the same way, not just from Paul and Timothy. He carries greetings at the end in verses 23 and 24 from the whole apostolic band and to others.

It's almost identical to the end of the letter to the Colossians. And in verse 3, the grace to you and peace is plural, just as it is in verse 23 and 25.

[19 : 52] Greetings to you all, grace with your spirit, all of you. It's a letter to the whole church, as verse 2 tells us, that meets in Philemon's house.

No doubt he had a large property, that's why they met there. It's to the whole church as well as to Philemon and his immediate family. And the fact that it's preserved makes it obvious that it was

used and known by the whole church.

I mean, it could be that Philemon obviously took it and read it first and then showed it to the others. It's very skilled in the language, it's very careful. It's not full of commands.

Paul wants this key Christian leader to be thinking through the implications of the gospel to his situation and then to act in line with the gospel. And he's confident that he will.

It may even be Paul feels he needs to show this letter to the church to back up and explain why he's going to act the way he does because it may just seem so surprising to others. But whatever the details of how it became public, the point is absolutely clear.

[20 : 59] Whatever happens between these two men, Philemon and Onesimus, will affect the whole church fellowship, without doubt, either for good or for ill. And therefore, both these individuals have responsibilities, not just to themselves, but to everyone in the fellowship, to be reconciled in Christ.

And of course, conversely, the whole church fellowship must be the kind of place where an atmosphere of love, an atmosphere of transformed relationships, is fostered so that this kind of thing is possible.

And of course, that will depend a lot, won't it, on individuals, especially those in prominent positions, especially leaders like Philemon, especially how they react in these kind of situations.

If you have a church situation where leaders in the church are constantly in a situation of unresolved conflict with others, well, the church as a whole will never be a place where there's tangible gospel fellowship.

That's obvious, isn't it? There will never be a place of restoration, of reconciliation. So Philemon needs to be an example as a leader and as the wronged party.

[22 : 16] He needs to lead the way. And of course, so does Inesimus. He does need to go back and to face up to things, to write matters that are wronged. He's doing that and he's done that.

He obviously is penitent. Otherwise, he wouldn't be there. And that, I think, explains why Paul's approach is so compassionate towards Inesimus. We also need to take that seriously, don't we, where there is a movement to set things to right, to be penitent.

We mustn't be harsh with people. We mustn't make repentance difficult. Difficult enough, isn't it? You know that. So we all have responsibilities. You see, that's what Paul's saying to one another and to the whole fellowship.

None of us is an island. What you do and what I do or won't do to restore broken fellowship with a brother or sister, well, it's going to affect everybody in the congregation, isn't it?

Our personal actions and reactions to relationship rupture, they have great power. Power for good and power for ill. Look at verse 7.

[23 : 26] There's Paul. at such a distance. Look how encouraged he is by Philemon's grace in the past to others. Verse 5. His faith and his love to all the saints.

That's given him the great joy of verse 7. Because hearts are refreshed by you. And that does thrill us, doesn't it? Somebody just told me this week of two folk in our own fellowship who'd been so kind and loving and helpful to another new Christian in meeting them and helping them.

It just thrilled my heart to hear that. But of course it can be the opposite, can't it? Remember Iodia and Syntyche in Philippians 4? Paul has to rebuke them from the pulpit.

They're just sitting there. Somebody's reading out Paul's letter. Suddenly they're coughing their sweetener. Goodness gracious, that's me he's mentioned. Telling me to get right with Syntyche across there. Don't suppose you'd like that if I did that sort of thing, would you?

You'd say it was very unnecessary. But Paul obviously thought it was very necessary in that case. Because personal strife between believers is never just that.

[24 : 36] It affects the health of the whole body, the whole church. That's a real challenge to you and to me, isn't it? Because the Bible tells us we are our brother's keeper, our sister's keeper.

And we must all strive together and as individuals to be a people whose relationships are constantly being restored through grace and love.

That's what real fellowship means. Not cups of tea and coffee. Real restoration. We need to be constantly a restoring people because we're constantly breakers of relationships.

That's the very essence of sin, isn't it? We're doing it all the time. We must be alert. Do you remember Hebrews chapter 12, verse 14? Strive for peace with everyone and for the holiness without which none will see the Lord.

See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God. That no root of bitterness springs up and causes trouble and by it many become defiled.

[25 : 41] That can very easily happen, can't it? A poisonous root springs up, a broken relationship, the ramifications that spread from that can poison a whole church.

Most of us won't face really the issue of a runaway slave or even of a runaway employee. But maybe we will face the issue of somebody at work that we find an extraordinarily difficult person and then they become a Christian.

You have to deal with that. We will face issues of a family member or of a friend that results in a real rupture of relationship, somebody who's maybe deeply wronged us.

Well, we've got to do all that we can to seek to restore that relationship. It might not be possible. It does take two sides, of course.

Remember what Paul says in Romans 12. If possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Well, have you done that?

[26 : 53] Have you done everything that you can do to live at peace with that person that you've had a big bust up with or a break in fellowship or whatever it is? See, if not, you might be the root of some bitterness that will poison many, many others.

So might I. It's very hard, isn't it? You see, there's a great cost involved in these things. But if we're a believer, if we're a brother and sister, that's our calling.

Real fellowship means transformed and restored relationships. Forgiveness costs. It's never free. Somebody must pay the debt. Always. But Paul says, that's real faith at work, through love. See, faith isn't wishy-washy, is it?

Faith is very robust, it's very practical, it's very powerful. There's a cost. But there's also a great reward because this mindset of love is exactly the thing that brings you fuller and deeper knowledge and experience of God's grace in your own life.

[28 : 06] Paul says, this is the way to higher things. That's the second point. You see, transformed personal relationships like this are vital for your own spiritual growth and maturity.

That's the point of Paul's prayer. That's the specific point of verse 6. Paul's concern is for him just as it is for Anesimus. not just for both sides of that relationship but for Philemon's relationship with the Lord Jesus himself.

How Philemon reacts to this situation above all will affect his relationship with the Lord Jesus, won't it? Paul's given thanks for Philemon's faith and his love in verse 4.

Really, probably should read love to the saints and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ because love to the saints is evidence that faith in Jesus is real. Remember James chapter 2?

Pious clap track and talk about faith doesn't count for anything if your brother is suffering and you're not helping him. But you see, Philemon's love is real. It can be seen as evidence of active faith.

[29 : 14] Isn't that phrase in verse 7, a beautiful one, refreshing the hearts of the saints? Isn't that something you'd love to have on your tombstone? He refreshed the hearts of the saints.

What a lovely phrase. That's real faith. It should remind us, shouldn't it, not to be interested and taken up with the wrong things. We make such a fuss sometimes about decisions for Christ, professions of faith.

All of these things can wither. Refreshing the hearts of the saints, that's evidence of real faith. And it brings joy to Paul, it brings joy to us. Philemon obviously was a man of substance and he's using that substance generously for the purpose that it was given, for refreshing the hearts of the saints. That's why God gives us what we have. That's why it brings joy to my heart when I hear about people doing these things, using what God's given them for the right purpose, to refresh the heart of the saints.

Some of us have got lovely houses and it's wonderful when they're being used for that, to refresh the hearts. Maybe it's to refresh the stomachs of hungry students or to help lonely people or a needy friend or something like that.

[30 : 30] Or when I hear of somebody who has a holiday home and they allow it to a brother or a sister who can't manage a holiday so that they can have a refreshment in their lives or whatever it might be. Of course, we don't all have houses like Philemon's, we can't all have church meetings, many of us do have church meetings in our house.

But we've all got something, something to share. It might just be a letter to a missionary, it might be a card to somebody who's struggling or bereaved, it might be a visit to somebody who you know is

needing help with something in their house, whatever it might be.

That's tangible fellowship. That's a real sharing of your faith. That word sharing in verse 6, the word *koinonia*, it's the word fellowship.

It's our word communion comes from it, it's partnership. And that's what tells if your faith is real, not bogus. But also, Paul says, do you notice this?

That is what affects real Christian growth too. Look at verse 6. It's the real sharing of faith, real tangible fellowship expressed in real transformed relationships with others in the body.

[31 : 42] It's that kind of sharing that is effective, he says, in deepening your knowledge. That is, your actual experience of the Lord Jesus himself and everything that we have in him.

That's the way to full knowledge, that's the way to full experience of all that we have in Jesus Christ. And there's no other way, says Paul. So it's striking, isn't it?

We're surrounded today in the church, aren't we, by movements and by books and by worship CDs and by special blessings. All of these things that offer the way to growth and special, deeper, spiritual experience of Christ.

But Paul says, the way to that is through effective fellowship, sharing your faith in real tangible ways. That's the way to growth, that's the way to maturity in Christ, to deepening your relationship with him.

Those words at the end of verse 6, for the sake of Christ, literally say, towards Christ or into Christ. The way on with Christ, the way deeper in with Christ, is by living a life of shared faith, of real fellowship, of real partnership in the gospel.

[32 : 58] Yes, of course, by sharing your faith in terms of evangelism, but here it primarily means sharing in terms of loving the saints, refreshing the hearts of the saints, and especially through building up and restoring and keeping right relationships with your believing brothers and sisters, whatever the cost.

That's what leads us closer to Christ. Because whatever we do for his people, for his sake, we're doing it for him.

Do you remember Jesus? As much as you did it to one of the least of these, you did it to me. And that's ultimately why such transformed relationships are vital for the church's well-being and for our spiritual maturity.

Because the transformation of relationship is basic to the gospel itself. The transformed relationships of true fellowship flow out of hearts that have themselves been transformed by the costly love of the Lord Jesus Christ for us.

And if you look at verses 17 to 20, you'll see why Paul makes it so personal. He's saying really what he says to the Corinthian church, isn't he? Imitate me, I've shown you the way of Christ.

[34 : 24] Imitate me even as I imitate Christ. Or as he writes to the Ephesians in Ephesians 5, be imitators of God as beloved children and walk in love as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and a sacrifice to God.

You see, Paul's pointing to his untransformed relationship with Anasimus to remind Philemon what he also owes to Paul. Verse 17, you consider me a partner, a *koinonos*, one who is in fellowship in the faith with me.

Well, so is he. We're all equal sharers in the Father's love that's so deep. Remember that, Philemon. Anasimus owes everything to Paul.

Yes, Paul brought him to birth, but Philemon, so do you. You owe me even your very self, says Paul. Don't you remember that? And yet Paul says he's willing to pay all Anasimus' debt in verse 18.

If there's anything at all, whether it's stolen money, whatever it was, charge it to me. Can you imagine Philemon ever saying to Paul, okay, Paul, this is the amount you owe me.

[35 : 34] Well, not if he'd understood the gospel. Couldn't possibly say that, could he? Not if he understood everything that he'd received at the hand of Paul from God, and the great debt that he'd been forgiven.

Remember the parable of the unforgiving servant in Matthew 18, who'd been himself forgiven ten thousand talents, wouldn't forgive his servant a few pennies. Just prove that he'd never understood the heart of his master, never understood grace.

You see what Paul's doing here? He's bringing Philemon's thinking right back to the heart of the gospel. That's where he must be if he's going to see what he must do.

That's where alone he'll find the motivation, the power to forgive and to restore Onesimus. Paul could command him to do it, of course he could. Might help Onesimus materially, but it would only embitter Philemon.

It would never give birth to the real transformation in relationship that Paul wanted to see, the real fellowship of brotherly love. Only the gospel gripping your heart and changing you can enable you to work reconciling changes with others.

[36 : 56] Verse 17, if you consider me your partner, receive him as you would receive me. What Paul means is remember the gospel of grace. Remember what it's all about.

Remember that Christ also received you. He welcomed you. Remember what that means. Philemon, God's heart was open to you. Think of the debt that he's forgiven you so gladly and so freely.

So you, don't you want to share Christ's welcome of you with your brother Onesimus? Paul uses the same words in Romans 15. Welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you for the glory of God.

Don't you find that when you've been wronged by somebody, perhaps very deeply, don't you find it helps you to put your brother or your sister's sin against you in perspective when you remember what you owe to the Lord Jesus Christ and the gospel?

I find that helps me. And we need that sort of gentle reminder from Paul, don't we? When he tells us to forgive and to restore and to be reconciled with maybe the friend who's let us down and wronged us but who knows it and who regrets it?

[38 : 19] Or the parent who's walked out on us years and years ago and left our childhood in tatters and yet deeply regrets it now?

Or the spouse who's deeply wronged us, broken the marriage vow and yet is repentant and is now seeking reconciliation?

Do I need to just jog your memory a little bit, says Paul, of the fact that you owe everything to my gospel and to the Christ who received you despite all of your sin against him?

Am I so wrong to ask you to refresh my heart by the way that you receive and restore your brother by grace? Am I so wrong to ask you that? see it's when we exemplify the gospel in our lives, isn't it, in real and tangible commitment to that kind of effective fellowship, in the nitty-gritty of real world relationships, it's then that our message has power, isn't it?

Don't you think the pagan world around Philemon's house, and in his house for that matter, would listen with fresh wonder to his explanation of his faith when they saw how he dealt with restoring Anisimus?

[39 : 43] Don't you think so? Don't you think our friends and neighbors would listen to our gospel message of grace if they saw that kind of thing among us backing up the message that we speak?

Paul wants Philemon to live up to his calling, to grow in his faith, to grow in his influence through rising to this challenge, and that's what he wants of you and me too.

But you see, if we want to see that kind of tangible fellowship, that kind of restoring faith at work in others among us, we've got to take the lead ourselves, haven't we?

We need to show that we are willing to bear this cost of living for Jesus. Paul did, he writes, not as an apostle, but as a prisoner, he says. He's appealing as a brother, as a partner, as money is where his mouth is.

I'll pay the debt. That's why his appeal has such power, isn't it? What he's saying, you see, in verse 20, where he says, I want some benefit from you, refresh my heart.

[40 : 52] What he's saying is, brother, will you do this for me? Will you overcome all that needs to be overcome to reconcile yourself with your brother?

Will you do it for me to refresh my heart? God, we sometimes will do things, won't we? Things that cost us a lot for those that we truly love, for those that we owe a great debt of honour.

You think of somebody that you would do something desperately difficult, something that you really don't want to do, you feel is such a struggle. You think of somebody that you'd do it if they said to you, would you just do it for me?

It probably is. It means, no doubt, that that's a very special relationship, doesn't it, for you? Well, Paul, you see, is appealing to a pretty special relationship.

But it's more special even than just his relationship with Philemon, isn't it? Do you see those last two words of verse 20? It's not just refresh my heart, he says, refresh my heart in Christ.

[41 : 59] He's not just saying, Philemon, will you do this hard thing, will you swallow your hurt, will you swallow your resentment, will you swallow even your righteous anger and bear the cost of forgiveness and restore your brother, will you do it for me, Paul, your mentor, your friend?

He's saying more than that, isn't he? He's really saying, Philemon, will you do this for Jesus? For your Savior, who gave everything for you.

Isn't that where these verses are really pointing, Philemon? Just listen again while I read them and just imagine not a conversation between Paul and Philemon about Onesimus, but between the Lord Jesus Christ and his Father about you.

My Father, if you consider me your partner, receive him as you would receive me. If he's wronged you at all, I charge that to my account.

I write this with my own, well, with my own blood, isn't it? I will repay it. Very striking, isn't it?

Tangible gospel fellowship is marked by truly transformed relationships.

[43 : 22] And the church of Jesus Christ is the place where broken human relationships can be and must be restored. That's the most basic response to the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The most basic response from people who truly do have themselves a restored relationship with the Father through Jesus Christ, the Son. Maybe some of us, even this morning, are facing a real struggle right now with some brother or sister in the fellowship, someone that there's been a deep rift with, someone that there's been a resentment in your heart, perhaps even a righteous resentment because of what they've done to you.

Well, friends, Paul says to us this morning, will you refresh my heart in Christ? Will you do it for Jesus? If your relationship to him really is special enough, you will do it for him, won't you?

You'll do it for Jesus. Let's pray. Amen.

Amen.