

Free to be a Slave

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[0 : 0 0] let's pray father god thank you for sending your son jesus to die for us lord thank you that he's an example for all your saints to follow and lord we just pray tonight that you would use me speak through me help me to be clear and lord we pray that you would help us to be alert and you would give us hearts willing to change to become more like you in jesus name we pray amen i want you to remember use your minds turn them on and remember something you might have to remember only back to yesterday you might have to remember back to something that happened 20 years ago remember the greatest wrong that someone has ever committed against you that's actually quite a hard thing to do i was thinking about what is the greatest wrong that ever has happened to me so maybe you're like me uh and no one's really done anything that bad to you um and there's just not something that sticks out in your mind so maybe you can think of something that uh or someone who you've come across who just oh man if you could if it was legal to kill you'd kill you know like they really just annoy you like nothing else or they're really inconvenient just wish they'd go away you sit in church and there's that guy sitting in front of you and say i just wish you would leave my church i wish you weren't you know think of that person how does it make you feel how does it make you react um and most of us uh know that we're not supposed to feel the way we feel we're not supposed to uh think the things we think uh and this letter that we've got here to philemon is about uh someone who's been wronged his slave has run away having to uh act out of love to uh this slave who's very uh who's inconvenienced him who's run away who's perhaps cost him money uh and so what i want us to think about tonight as we look through and see what's going on in philemon uh i want you to have in your minds that as christians just like philemon was we are duty bound to act out of love towards other christians and the character of this love doesn't actually uh it's radically different to uh the accepted world behavior that is uh the way we're supposed to act out of love for others is not supposed to be the way the world thinks is okay you know when you don't like someone when someone's inconvenienced you when someone's wronged you it's okay to not sit near them it's okay to never talk to them it's okay to uh want to uh get back at them to start spreading a rumor about that's okay when the world's speaking but as christians out of love we are called to something radically different and it's because uh of jesus and what he's done for us uh and because he gave his life up for us we should be willing to give up our pride or our uh feelings of uh you know that's not fair or whatever it might be uh our hurt social standing in life because jesus was willing to give up his life for us so keep that in your brain as we are working through philemon which is a book uh that illustrate a letter that illustrates to us how christians should act uh out of fellow out of love for their fellow believers now philemon uh hopefully you've still got it open there on page 100 970 was written uh in or around ad 58 or 60 so we're talking about 30 ish years after jesus died it was written by a guy called paul very famous

if you read your bible a lot he wrote most of it in the new testament that is uh and it was written while he was probably in a roman prison uh which is why he says i'm a prisoner of christ jesus because he's been preaching the gospel he's in jail uh and it's closely very closely related to another letter we have in the bible which is the letter of the colossians uh and it was probably sent uh at the same time as that letter to uh the same church and uh that was more of a public uh corporate letter this is a more personal letter but as we'll come back to notice it's also addressed to the church um so here we have it our letter to philemon from paul uh so in verse 2 it says it's to philemon and so who is philemon uh we don't uh really know that much about him in fact all we do know about him is found in this letter to philemon uh and it's uh perhaps probably a fair guess that he's probably quite a rich guy he owns some slaves or he at least owned one um but probably more he's got a there's a church meeting in his house he's probably got a relatively uh good-sized house he's at least he's not homeless um he seems to be a fairly godly man let's uh look at verses four to seven when i remember you in my prayers i always thank my god because i hear of your love for all the saints and your faith toward the lord jesus i pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective when you perceive all the good that we may do for christ i've indeed received much joy and encouragement from your love because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you my brother so paul is thanking god for philemon because of his love the love he has for other christians and because of his faith and then in verse six he says i pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective when you perceive all the good that we may do in christ uh and now if you're thinking what does that mean that's what i was thinking when i read that what does that mean does that mean he's a good evangelist does that mean what does that mean i'm not really sure and when you're not really sure what a verse might mean a great way uh to try and see if you can gain some more clarity is to pick up another version of the bible and to read it and see if that casts light on the situation so i've got two more translations here uh one from the nasb and one from the tniv by the way uh if you don't have access to another bible then uh you've only got one uh then if you are confused about a verse then you can come borrow one of mine i've got a couple of different bible versions and so do many other people in this church we're very rich uh with the amount of bibles that we're blessed to have uh amongst us here anyway verse six in a couple of other versions in the nasb reads like this and i pray that the fellowship of your faith may become effective through the knowledge of every good thing which is in you for christ's sake of the tniv which says 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 so what what what this is saying about philemon uh and and about uh yeah about philemon is that uh paul's not praying for uh him to be necessarily a good evangelist which is what i think we think of when we think sharing of the faith we think i share my faith by telling people the gospel uh that's probably part of it but primarily he's talking about someone living out their faith in the context of and

young that's again oh i'm sick of hearing this uh in the context of a community of other believers that is uh he he prays that his faith would be effective as he shares that with other people as they have fellowship together um and so he's not he's not uh talking about a sharing of facts about jesus but of a real life that is transformed by those true facts uh about jesus that we have in the gospel and we he goes on in verse eight we can learn more about uh philemon from from verses eight to twenty i'll just give you a quick overview but we see that philemon is the owner of this slave anisimus uh and who this slave he's run away um who he's been converted while he's run away and paul is requesting that philemon welcome him welcome him back uh but not as a slave but as a brother and so philemon uh obviously is a godly man and he also obviously owns a slave uh which hopefully ring some alarm bells and you're kind of going hang on godly owns a slave how can someone who's godly have a slave um i don't think this by any means is i don't think philemon is written to talk to us about slavery but i think it's an issue that might cause red flags in your head that stop you from being able to get to the central part of this book so let me try and deal with this issue of paul praising a man for being godly who is sharing his faith in a community who owns a slave uh or maybe more than one slave um first of all the first thing we have to do is we have to take off our 21st century minds which think of slavery as the oppression of black afro-americans in britain and america um not to say that that makes it any better however uh it's it's slavery in the first century is less tied up with racial uh what's the word racial oppression that's the word i was thinking suppression but that wasn't right uh and perhaps uh some people think that in the city of colossae there were might have one third of the population might have been slaves and some people uh even sold themselves into slavery so instead of living on the street uh they chose to sell themselves into slavery so they'd have a house and some food and they'd get looked after not always well uh and not all slaves were good so there were some slaves who worked for you know the the king or a rich person they lived pretty good lives there are other slaves who worked in salt mines they didn't live uh such good lives so slavery is a bit different to what we think of uh but not only is slavery different but actually the whole political life of all people in the first century is different and that's why i think paul also doesn't condemn slaves um uh because uh in the first century uh slaves uh christians didn't have the australian christian lobby in the first century they didn't have uh christian politicians they didn't have people who uh were in uh positions of power uh who could uh argue with the caesar guy and say hey we're not so cool with this slavery thing um how about uh you just change your mind

uh and he would have said how about i kill you and that would have been how it went um they didn't have political democratic debates with each other about what the best way of life was they had fights with swords about who was stronger uh and so if you said the caesar was wrong then you got killed um so if you can avoid that that's probably a good idea but i think we can see here in philemon that paul is thinking of something better than slavery i think uh you know we see uh that he's asking for philemon to uh welcome him back as a brother uh and then in verse that's in verse 16 and in verse 17 he says so if you consider me your partner welcome him as you would welcome me he's saying welcome your runaway slave who deserves to be punished by all rights welcome him back as if he's the esteemed apostle paul so instead of condemning slavery which would have done him no good uh saying slavery is wrong we should abolish it it doesn't make sense in the first century to say that what he's doing uh is he's saying you're a christian and this is the way christians live together in fellowship in community we live uh as we are in christ and all of us can think of that famous verse in galatians uh there's neither slave nor free all are one in christ and i also want to look at uh one corinthians 7 to sort of illustrate what paul thinks about this issue in 1 corinthians 7 17 to 24 he says this i'll just read it for you however that may be let each of you lead the life that the lord has assigned to which god called you this is my rule in all the churches was anyone at the time of his call already circumcised let him not seek to remove the marks of circumcision was anyone at the time of his call uncircumcised let him not seek circumcision circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing but obeying the commandments of god is everything let each of you remain in the condition in which you were called were you a slave when you were called do not be concerned about it even if you can gain your freedom make use of your present condition now more than ever for whoever was called in the lord as a slave is a free person belonging to the lord just as whoever was free when called is a slave of christ you are bought with a price do not become slaves of human masters in whatever condition you were called brothers and sisters there remain with god and why can you remain there with god because in god you are something else you are be you when you become a christian your primary identification who you are is not who you are on earth it's not the youth minister it's not uh the laborer it's not the businessman who you are in christ is a child of god and it doesn't matter what you are you to do that faithfully but remember that you are a child of god and that is your first and primary identity and that is why paul can say in philemon that uh philemon is to welcome onesimus as his equal because in christ they are both equal they are one in christ together but i guess as you were perhaps listening to that maybe you were pre-reading uh before church tonight uh you'll notice that paul doesn't tell him you must

do this you must welcome him back as a brother or i'll be really annoyed rather look at this in verse eight he says for this reason though i am bold enough in christ to command you to do your duty yet i would rather appeal to you on the basis of love and then again in verse 14 he says but i preferred to do nothing without your consent this is why i sent in this in this back in order that your good deed might be voluntary and not something forced so paul doesn't want philemon to act because he has to grumbling but he wants him to act out of love but i think the other thing you notice when you read this is it doesn't really look like philemon has a choice like paul's kind of saying i don't want to tell you what to do but let me just remind you that out of love this is the way people act people who love jesus act this way let me just remind you about that before you think about doing the wrong thing and i'm the apostle by the way i'm a prisoner of christ jesus uh i'm very very uh important uh and you don't want to do the wrong thing um so it is voluntary but there's also a duty a higher duty than the authority of paul and that's what he's appealing to he's saying i don't want to tell you to do this but remember to act out of love um and so i think philemon is duty bound uh because he's been saved by jesus to act out of love in a generous way in an extravagantly graceful way uh towards his slave onisimus that is radically radically different from what the world would expect which is a runaway slave should be punished i think all of this this idea of love the idea that philemon uh has to welcome him back like this and the way that paul is speaking about onisimus is all for to point us towards jesus the way the reason they're acting like this is because of jesus so you'll notice that uh in verse 12 paul says this i am sending him onisimus that is my own heart back to you so paul calls him his own heart and then skip down a few verses in the paragraph starting at verse 17 so if you consider me your partner welcome him as you would welcome me if he has wronged you in any way or owes you anything charge that to my account i paul am writing this with my own hand it's like a signature uh i will repay it and i say nothing about you're owing me even yourself can you see how that is a bit like jesus and if you can't i'm going to help you see it you see jesus loves us as his own heart that's why he was willing to come to the earth to live for us that's why he was willing to die for us and not only that but if we put our faith in jesus he is the one who advocates on our behalf a bit like paul's doing in this letter you see paul is saying uh don't punish him and if he does deserve punishment let that punishment that debt whatever it is let that be charged to my account let me pay that debt for my slave paul's acting like that because he knows how jesus has done he knows what jesus is doing for him he's advocating to god for him

[20 : 24] and that's what uh he then does for an isthmus and then he expects philemon uh to act uh in a way in a christ-like way he expect he's expecting that philemon out of love will forgive the slave who rightfully deserves punishment just like uh when jesus advocates for us when we are saved by jesus god forgives us and charges our punishment which we rightly deserve to jesus's account and not to ours a great great thing i also think that what's going on here in this letter and what paul's requesting uh as i've hinted at before all of this happens within uh the context of a community of believers who are gathering around you see if we write this letter today uh if i was to write this letter please let go of please don't hurt an isthmus philemon i'd probably send him an email or something and i probably wouldn't cc in his whole church like if i'm going to send matt a email uh about something he's done wrong i'm not going to cc you all in you're not going to get to hear about our little disagreement but here he's kind of done that he's kind of cc'd in the rest of his church to philemon our dear friend to a fifth uh a fifth year our sister archipus our fellow soldier and to the church in your house the whole church is getting to read this letter about how phile how paul wants philemon to act towards anisimus and then when i talked about verse six before i said that uh that involved community paul is praying that the sharing of of your faith may become effective when you perceive all the good that we may do for christ there's a idea that philemon is acting within his church community there and because of jesus again all these guys they share fellowship with one another they share community with one another they're one in christ and so is their church their church is involved you see this is i think the great lie of 21st century christianity is that if i have a problem with matt that it doesn't affect anyone else here if he's done something wrong to me then you're fine everyone else is fine uh and we just got to sort it out in our own private way and that's true to some extent but actually we're all kind of the one church the one people of god we're gathered in this one place and if you've got disagreements amongst each other you know matt's trying to convince that row that he's cooler than me and i'm trying to convince this row that you're calling me it's division it's not good uh it's not what um god wants of us and this letter to philemon shows us that personal disagreements uh affect the whole and i think that's why he sends this letter to the whole church because uh how philemon acts is not just a matter between philemon and god and anisimus and paul but it's a matter between the whole church community gathered around uh in uh colossi in philemon's house um working together so how we live together as christians how we interact with one another all of this points to our faith in jesus see if we if we don't sacrifice our wants if we don't sacrifice our time if we're not willing

to sacrifice our money if we're not willing to sacrifice our social standing at school if we're not willing to sacrifice uh job promotions or um seats on the bus for people who look older than us or whatever it might be what real difference is jesus made and sometimes people say i just want uh people to see that i'm just completely normal and then they'll realize that christianity is completely normal and they'll want to be a christian no they won't they'll just want to be normal like christians are different and you ought to be different and that will point to jesus the way you are willing to stand up for the kid who's bullied at school the way you're willing to stand up against dodgy business practices the way you're willing to stand up to lecturers at university who are saying telling lies about jesus the way you're willing to uh love the unlovable the way you're willing to cry with the broken hearted that's what says you're a christian and if you're not willing to do that kind of thing well then you do i think need to ask yourself what difference has jesus made see philemon gets this letter and he says yeah but he's still my slave so uh 50 lashes and down in the back room uh scrubbing the floors or whatever then what jesus what difference has jesus made to philemon's life he hasn't made any difference that's what all slave owners uh are allowed to do that's the kind of law you you treat your slave as they deserve but if he does welcome him back and i'm assuming that he did welcome him back as a brother uh then that shows not only uh a great uh love for anisimus but a great love for jesus and a great work that jesus has done in philemon's life and because it's happening in community it strengthens the community uh and it spurs the rest of the community on to love and to good deeds for each other uh let me read something from john chapter 13 34 and 35 says this jesus says i give you a new commandment that you love one another just as i have loved you you also should love one another by this everyone will know that you are my disciples if you have love for one another the only way you can know you have love for one another is if you hang out with one another and uh the more you hang out with someone the more uh they can annoy you uh and so the more you have to love them uh and so jesus wants us to love each other and i think that really what paul's asking for here in philemon is really just an outworking of uh jesus's words there that uh you will know who this is who his disciples are if you love one another if you go beyond the core so christians us if you're a christian we're duty bound to act out of love towards our fellow believers towards the guy or girl sitting next to you in the pew and that's a radical thing it's an amazing thing uh and it's not because love is a cool thing it's not because we don't we don't we're not we're not bound to act out of love because love is good we're bound to act out of love because jesus has first loved us see jesus ought to make a real difference in your life jesus ought to transform the way you act you ought to be so blaringly uncoolly different at everything you go to because you

just love everyone so much uh that uh people are just like oh man that guy he's just way too nice it really annoys me i wish he'd just be less nice um and there's no choice people think you have a choice i can choose to do 10 amounts of loving activity this week because jesus died for me uh but i won't do the other things that i don't kind of like that much there's no choice about how you like it uh how much do you think philemon liked having his whole church see him forgive a slave who had run away think about if he had other slaves how much do you think his other slaves uh would have what would they have thought what i mean he's probably got all this going through he said if i forgive this slave who's run away how's my authority going to preserve the rest of myself they're all going to run away you know it's too hard not going to forgive him too hard no choice he's a christian philemon's a christian onesimus is a christian they're duty bound to act out of love towards each other they're brothers in christ they're one in christ and there's hope because uh we know all the great verses that tell us that god gives us the holy spirit uh when we put our faith and trust in him and so my prayer is that like philemon i think a spirit-filled christian acting in love towards his his brother onesimus his slave brother onesimus uh we too by the power of the spirit uh can act in love towards all people uh towards all brothers towards the people we don't like towards the people we do like towards the people who are hard work towards the people who are easy and so my uh challenge to you uh is to be like philemon uh to be willing to do outlandish uh things assuming of course he did them which i take it as he did uh and to pray to pray that the holy spirit would empower you to look out for that person at school who uh no one likes uh give them a hug maybe don't uh sit next to them at lunchtime look out for that guy at work who's struggling and help him out look out for the uh person at uni who uh no one likes look out for uh the guy at uni who's preaching a false gospel and in love go up and say hey i disagree with what you're saying let me talk to you uh stop being shy uh stop feeling like um you don't want to and pray that the spirit would give you boldness to do the big things that christians are bound to do out of love because jesus did something harder that's the thing jesus did something harder than you're ever going to do you're not going to die for the sins of someone else that is a hard thing and if jesus did it for you uh why not walk across the road for us for someone out of love so let's pray father god we thank you for the letter to philemon lord we thank you that it shows us uh that christians are bound to act out of love and we thank you uh that philemon uh was a great christian man that onesimus became a christian when he was with paul and lord we uh thank you that this letter was preserved to us so we could see how those two people formerly slave and master were required to act as brothers because of what jesus had done for them and lord we just pray that for each of us you would help us to have the boldness uh the courage the patience uh lord whatever it might be to act lovingly towards our fellow believers to act lovingly towards those people who get on our nerves lord to forgive those people who have wronged us

in some way lord jesus please help us to be radically different disciples of you lord help us not to be normal but help us to be people who overflow with love by the power of your holy spirit in jesus name amen