

Philemon Series Slide

When I arrived in Wildflecken, Germany in October of 1986- we weren't allowed to drink the local milk and it was the peak of the Cold War.

It's hard to describe the Cold War between America and the Soviet Union to people that didn't live through it.

Because it was never an active war. If you watch Red Dawn or Rocky IV or the 1980 Miracle on Ice at the Lake Placid Olympics you can get a taste of the whole scene- but to live through it was- strange. It was a time of espionage and suspicion of a nuclear attack...most kids in the 80s lived in this idea that at any moment we might see a yellow hammer and sickle on red parachutes littering our American sky— and when that moment came- would you be ready to fight?

And brother- as an 8 year old- I WAS. Send Ivan Drago directly me. I was like a combination of a ninja, and Rambo, and Arnold Schwarzenegger in Predator. Even though I wasn't allowed to see any of those movies. I told my mom once "I can't wait til World War III".

It was not well received.

The whole period was filled with this sort of underlying angst about when the cold war would go hot. When would the nuclear missiles start flying around.

A big part of the Cold War- especially for the Soviets- was propaganda (though Rocky IV is a pretty effective American propaganda in its own right).

Propaganda is not when you get a real good look at something.

And its not a one legged adult male goose that finally receives his prosthetic.

Propaganda is an intentional information campaign that skews the truth in order to make very clear heroes and villains. It appeals to emotions and ignores objective truth or details that muddy the water- all to get you to believe something so that you live in a certain way. Ready to fight. Ready to defend.

Propaganda has big WERE RIGHT AND THEY'RE WRONG WERE GOOD AND THEY'RE BAD energy.

In times when you cannot afford to lose....you also can't afford to be honest about mistakes or evil done in the name of a cause- so you use propaganda.

After WWII, Germany was split into East and West as a country-the West Germany was a free democracy- and East Germany was communist.

Once- my dad took me to the border. He gave me a pair of binoculars- I looked through them- and through high fences with barbed wire at the top- I could see the Communist soldiers staring right back at me.

My thought 'How can anyone be so committed to the bad guy?'" I felt sorry for them...and also felt a bit proud...and self righteous- that I was the good guy- The American- Go ahead- come at me I'm ready.

Something else happened in 1986 the same year I moved to Germany.

In Chernobyl in the USSR- there was a deadly nuclear explosion. But it didn't come from a missile fired by the United States.

It came from the overheating of a nuclear reactor. Without going into all the details, one of the major factors of that explosion was the Soviet Union's own pride- Their refusal to lose to their enemy- and their commitment to keeping the truth about their mistakes hidden in order to save face and portray themselves as "the good guys".

That reactor exploded because they saw themselves in a competition with America to harness nuclear energy, so they cut corners- used the cheapest material so they could put up more nuclear reactors quickly- and after the reactor in Chernobyl exploded- they cut the phone lines of the people in the town so they could control the narrative... with propaganda.

They refused to tell the truth about their mistakes, to keep their image pristine. So instead of a few people dying from the initial explosion- thousands died from radiation poisoning.

In fact- to this day the official number of deaths is only 31 from the explosion. but higher estimates of actual deaths as a result of the radiation range up to 60,000 lives lost.

The Chernobyl meltdowns happened in April of 1986. My family arrived in October of that year to Germany.

...and that's why I couldn't drink the milk. The radiation had made its way over 800 miles and had infected German cows.

It's funny. All those years spent wondering if the enemy would cause a nuclear disaster...and in the end...it came from an attempt to save face and a prideful refusal to admit their own faults.

They believed their own propaganda.

Title Slide “End the Cold War: Why You Should Drop the Propaganda & Reconcile Relationships”- Philemon

And that’s what the NT letter to Philemon is about.
Nuclear safety...in relationships.

Paul’s letter to Philemon is the shortest letter in the NT and we’re gonna spend this week and next week squeezing the good stuff out of it.

So let's read the whole letter- and I'll explain as we go.

Philemon 1:1-25

Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother:

**To Philemon our dear friend and coworker,
2 to Apphia our sister, to Archippus our fellow soldier, and to the church that meets in your home.**

First thing- Philemon is a fellow follower of Jesus in this early church. He has known and helped Paul...and he is wealthy- the church meets in his home.

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

4 I always thank my God when I mention you in my prayers, 5 because I hear of your love for all the saints and the faith that you have in the Lord Jesus. 6 I pray that your participation in the faith may become effective through knowing every good thing that is in us for the glory of Christ. 7 For I have great joy and encouragement from your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you, brother.

Seems like a good dude. That helps others and is serious about knowing Jesus and supporting the church.

8 For this reason, although I have great boldness in Christ to command you to do what is right, 9 I appeal to you, instead, on the basis of love. I, Paul, as an elderly man and now also as a prisoner of Christ Jesus, 10 appeal to you for my son, Onesimus. I became his father while I was in chains. 11 Once he was useless to you, but now he is useful both to you and to me. 12 I am sending him back to you — I am sending my very own heart. 13 I wanted to keep him with me, so that in my imprisonment for the gospel he might serve me in your place. 14 But I didn't want to do anything without your consent, so that your good deed might not be out of obligation, but of your own free will. 15 For perhaps this is why he was

separated from you for a brief time, so that you might get him back permanently, 16 no longer as a slave, but more than a slave — as a dearly loved brother. He is especially so to me, but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord.

Uh oh. Now we've got some friction.

Philemon has a slave known as Onesimus that has runaway. And somehow- he runs into Paul...and Paul leads him to faith in Jesus. ..and then tells Onesimus- "Bro- you gotta go back"

Now- lets talk about slavery for a minute.

On one hand- this is very different than the 18-19th century Chattel slavery we're so familiar with in American history. This is debtor slavery- essentially functioning as Onesimus owes a financial debt he can't pay to Philemon.

Now- that said- there is something fundamental to the image of God in humanity that no human should ever own another human.

So its very off-putting- when Paul send Onesimus BACK to Philemon. Why not high five him and say- YES! you got out!

We'll get into that.

But did you notice- he sends Onesimus back with this letter- and he tells Philemon- "Take him back no longer as a slave— but more than a slave- treat him as a dearly loved brother."

Onward

17 So if you consider me a partner, welcome him as you would me. 18 And if he has wronged you in any way, or owes you anything, charge that to my account. 19 I, Paul, write this with my own hand: I will repay it — not to mention to you that you owe me even your very self.

Paul says- if he stole from you- I'll pay whatever he owes. If he is indebted to you...i'll take care of that bill.

Then look at this little slick move right here.

Paul says "Oh....don't forget that I'm the guys that introduced you to Jesus and you'd pretty much have no eternal or transcendent purpose in your life if it was't for me... BUUUUUTTT...if you need me to slide you some cash to cover what Onesimus took... I'm happy to oblige." This is borderline passive aggressive...I don't think it is...but its close.

20 Yes, brother, may I benefit from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in Christ. 21 Since I am confident of your obedience, I am writing to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say. 22 Meanwhile, also prepare a guest room for me, since I hope that through your prayers I will be restored to you.

Another slick move here at the end- “Get a guest room ready...I’d love to come stay with you soon.” In other words- I’m gonna come check up on you to see what you decided to do with Onesimus.

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

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

That is the Word of the Lord from Paul’s letter to Philemon.

In a couple of weeks we’re gonna get back to talking about the Good Life-

This year- we’ve been thinking about what makes up the Good Life.
In all of my research- from social science to the scriptures- it boils down to 3 things.

Can I QUIZ you? Dont yell it out
(Have these appear in building fashion- 1- then 1-2, then 1-2 and 3 as i get an answer)

- 1) Spiritual Connection**
- 2) Deep Relationships**
- 3) Transcendent Purpose**

All three of those are in this letter

Next week I’ll get to the Transcendent Purpose part of this letter that will launch us into the next 6 weeks where we’ll talk about How to live a life of purpose that is much bigger than your own personal goals and dreams,....

But today- we’re gonna learn from Paul about Nuclear Safety in deep relationships.

Because the deepest relationships can be completely ruined without Reconciliation... without I’m sorry and I forgive you...

The deepest relationships can completely meltdown if two sides become equally devoted to believing their own propaganda.

1- There is no reconciliation without forgiveness- no forgiveness without truth- no truth until you drop the propaganda.

We live in the age of cancel culture and online propaganda. If collectively the country decides that there is a person- a political figure- a celebrity- you name it- that you should have a definite opinion about- your social media feed will get tailored content to

your preferences to make sure that you believe either the best or worst of that person. So that you know if they should be canceled or honored.

And like me staring across the East/West German border- you'll be looking at anyone who supports that person like I did those East Germans- "How in the world can you support the bad guys". Meanwhile- they are thinking the same thing about you.

Even in the church we can live out a kind of cancel culture. Don't like somebody?- change churches.

What about with your family?- ever just decide somebody is dead wrong- and that defines their entire role in your life- so you cut off communication because you just can't imagine yourself speaking to them again?

Often, because of our pride and desire to save face- we actually fail to admit our own role in the meltdown of a relationship. So honesty turns into propaganda- a slight twisting of the truth that makes ME look good and YOU look bad. Which ultimately results in downright lying to yourself and others...

..and I'm here to tell you- you won't be able to contain the radiation of a relationship that goes sideways like that. It will affect anyone in close proximity to you. your spouse, your kids, your friends, your family...

Listen- for those that follow Jesus Christ- we are called out of cancel culture- and into reconciliation....and that means forgiveness is necessary...and that means we need to stop producing and believing our own propaganda.

Reconciliation is the theme of this short letter- that Paul wrote to Philemon...

First, lets think about the complicated nature of this whole situation.

Who is the bad guy?

Is it Philemon?

v 5 & 7

On one hand- he hosts this new church plant in Colassae in his home. He's using his resources for the Kingdom. Paul commends him for being a loving person of faith- and how he has refreshed the saints.

On the other hand- he OWNS SLAVES.

And yes- this is for sure different than race-based chattel slavery- but still- Paul finds it necessary to write this letter to him to make sure he does the right thing- which is to free Onesimus.

v 17-18

Ok- how about Onesimus?

On one hand- he is a man who has been mistreated- at the very least he has incurred this debt- so life has not been great to him- you at least feel like he is in the weak position deserving of some level of sympathy.

On the other hand- Its very likely- that when Onesimus ran away- he stole from Philemon. After all- you can't just run away with nothing. He had to have the money and resources to actually make it all the way to Paul in prison.

Was this theft justifiable?

Who's side should we be on here? Who is the good guy- who is the bad guy? Who should we cancel?

Back to 1)

You better believe- all of Philemon's Facebook feed was articles on how bad Onesimus was- he wasn't even a Christian when he left- and he probably was just using this money on alcohol and drugs.

And all of Onesimus' feed was filled up with pictures of the rich and greedy Philemon who never even thought of Onesimus as a person. In fact- the name Onesimus just means "useful"- it probably is not even his real name- his whole identity had been reduced to whether or not he was USEFUL! UGH! Can you blame him for stealing?

The real villain here is PHILEMON!

And see- Paul comes in and blows up all that propaganda...

Paul stops the divisive cancel-culture talk...and he says "Philemon is actually a loving and encouraging person" and he says "Onesimus- he is so close to me- I consider him my son."

In fact, did you notice all the family talk in here?

Listen to the titles Paul uses.

Brother, Friend, Coworker, Father, Son, My very own heart...dearly loved brother,

THAT is the kind of name calling that Paul is doing. Sounds like propaganda?- actually- its the truth.

v 10-12

We don't know exactly how Onesimus ended up running into Paul- who is imprisoned at the time. That's why he refers to his own chains a couple of times.

But it seems most likely that Onesimus - who would have known about Paul- likely ran away to go to Paul to appeal for his freedom. When he got to Paul- Paul said, "Onesimus, yes- you owe a debt to Philemon- but you owe an even greater debt to God.'

Yes- you are bound to serve Philemon's household, but you are in chains to your sin and the deadly service of yourself.

Then he told them about Jesus.

Onesimus- Every single one of us owes a debt to God we can't pay. We were created to be his children- working with him to make the world a beautiful place of deep love. INstead- we rebelled and lived for ourselves. That's you Onesimus. And you owe a debt to God- your very life is required.

But Jesus- who limited himself for you by putting on flesh- becoming a human- Jesus- the only one who never rebelled- He was counted as a sinner- he was crucified and died in your place. And then he resurrected on the third day- proving that sin and death are no longer your destiny- Onesimus.

Onesimus, my brother, my son- in Christ you have been freed from the penalty of your sin. Now- Go and live a life of freedom...and the first step is repentance and reconciling relationships. I want you to go back and repay what you owe to Philemon.

Now- I want you to imagine this. Imagine Paul sending Onesimus back- to Philemon... and Onesimus fully expecting that when he returns- he is in for maybe a lifetime of paying back this debt.

Instead, when the letter is read aloud- he here's this.

v 18-19

And if he has wronged you in any way, or owes you anything, charge that to my account. 19 I, Paul, write this with my own hand: I will repay it- not to mention to you that you owe me even your very self.

Imagine the tears in Onesimus' eyes. Onesimus thought he had years of work in front of him- But Paul says- Whatever he owes- charge it to me.

Did you know that this is the only one of Paul's letters that doesn't mention the death and resurrection of Jesus?

Its odd- Paul ALWAYS talks about the gospel. I think its not in Philemon- because Paul has become the embodiment of the gospel here.

Think about it. He led both Philemon and Onesimus to faith in Christ (we know this about Philemon because here at the end of v 19 he says- Philemon- you owe me your very self!

IOW- Philemon- you'd be headed to hell on a scholarship if I didn't share the gospel with you.

To Onesimus and Philemon- Paul has become the mediator- the reconciler- who has reminded them in his actions that they were sinners forgiven by God in Christ. SO forgive.

He is reminding them that they have been adopted into a family- so treat each like like brothers- no slaves and masters.

That in Christ- all are free- so Philemon- set him free.

Paul takes on Onesimus debt- while he also tells Philemon- "Boy- you better not charge me a thing- because you'd be dead without me- I never charged you for your freedom."

Back to 1)

Listen- There is no reconciliation without forgiveness. Letting go of the debt you believe someone owes you. Letting go of the grudge, the hurt. Canceling cancel culture.

And there is no forgiveness if both of you don't look at the truth.

That requires being honest. Onesimus had to be honest about his theft and his debt. ...so Paul slices through his propaganda- all the belief that he had about being the victim...and he makes him face the truth of his own sin.

And Paul slices through Philemon's belief that he has the "RIGHT" to own and Onesimus. By pointing to the truth that Philemon OWES his life to Paul- and even more so to Christ.

If you are willing to PROPAGANDA yourself out of EITHER the truth about your own sin...OR the TRUTH about the saving grace of Jesus you have received through his death and resurrection- then you will never make progress to forgiveness or reconciliation.

When Jesus said on the sermon on the mount "Take the log out of your own eye so you can see clearly to remove the speck from your brothers"- he's basically saying- You are believing your own propaganda. Unless you want a nuclear meltdown- be honest about your own sin and God's graciousness towards you- so you can treat your brother or sisters sin with the same seriousness and the same grace. To restore them.

One disclaimer before we move forward- that's not in this text...but I do want to mention it.

There are some relationships that may be abusive...they have just become completely unsafe. The scripture says "as much as it depends on you, be at peace with everyone."

That is your responsibility.

It is not your responsibility to control or excuse the actions of someone else.

So- DO NOT HEAR ME SAYING- Just let him keep beating you. Or just let her keep berating you.

That is not what we're talking about here. The best thing to do is to seek wise counsel from a number of trusted sources— as forgiveness is always possible on your part- but reconciliation takes both parties.

Onward.

2- Reconciliation isn't just being right, it's being right by your side.

There are 2 Greek words hidden in this english text that really shes some light on what Paul is doing in this letter.

v 9

He says I "Appeal to you" on the basis "Love"

First- Appeal is the word Parakaleo. That literally means to Call Alongside. It means to comfort. The noun form of it is what Jesus calls the Holy Spirit- The comforter.

Second- the word love is the word Agape. This is the highest form of love. It is the love that God has and gives. Covenant- promise keeping love.

v 8-9

Paul makes it very clear that he doesn't want to pull rank on Philemon. He very well could pull out his apostolic authority and just tell Philemon what to do. But he doesn't.

v 14

He gives Philemon the free will- the power to make a choice.

And he says- I'm calling to you to a higher love, Philemon. I'm connecting to you more than I'm correcting you. It is God's connection to me that corrected me...a guy who was killing Christians- and Jesus came to me- and called me alongside him...now I'm

do the same to you. You now have the free will- the choice to honor God with what you do with Onesimus.

Now- I won't deny that there is some pretty persuasive little love jabs in this letter.

v 21-22

"I believe you'll do the right thing"

"oh by the way- get a guest room ready- I'll come to stay with you soon...OH I guess then I'll get to see what you decided about Onesimus- whether to treat him as a brother or a slave"

and don't forget- this letter from Paul would have been read in front of the ENTIRE HOUSE CHURCH- which means everybody is looking at Philemon to see what he's going to do. So on one hand- Paul gives Philemon free will...on the other hand- he is DEFINITELY smoothing the path to the right decision for him.

Back to 2)

But notice- Paul doesn't write the letter just to be right. He doesn't just lay down the law and make commands. He wants to be connection AS he delivers correction. He wants to stay close.

A couple of practical things about truthful non-propaganda reconciliation conversations

How you say the truth is as important as what you say.

- Its a soft tone- respectful of humanity (brother, father, child)

Affirm the good as you deal with the difficult.

4-7 comes v 8

Starts with I'm really thankful from you.

Cooling the temperature down

Stay connected while you correct.

I want a relationship- I'm gonna come stay with you.

3) To be Christ-like is to be a reconciler.

When Paul writes to the church in Ephesus- he tells them to imitate Christ- his love and forgiveness.

Ephesians 4:25-32

25 Therefore, putting away lying, speak the truth, each one to his neighbor, because we are members of one another. 26 Be angry and do not sin. Don't let the sun go down on your anger, 27 and don't give the devil an opportunity. 28 Let the thief no longer steal. Instead, he is to do honest work with his own hands, so that he has something to share with anyone in need. 29 No foul language should come from your mouth, but only what is good for building up someone in need, so that it gives grace to those who hear. 30 And don't grieve God's Holy Spirit. You were sealed by him for the day of redemption. 31 Let all bitterness, anger and wrath, shouting and slander be removed from you, along with all malice. 32 And be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving one another, just as God also forgave you in Christ.

In the Lords prayer...look how Jesus teaches us to relate to God and our fellow man. He makes a direct connection.

Matthew 6:12-15

12 And forgive us our debts,

as we also have forgiven our debtors.

13 And do not bring us into temptation,

but deliver us from the evil one.

14 "For if you forgive others their offenses, your heavenly Father will forgive you as well. 15 But if you don't forgive others, your Father will not forgive your offenses.

Back to 3)

Finish with Jesus story of Matthew 18- Unforgiving Servant- comes right after Jesus' command in how to bring the truth into relationships that need reconciling.

Less than 6 months after my family left Germany- we watched the Berlin wall- come down. The reconciliation of East and West.

Can you see that in your relationships? A wall coming down. The end of your own cold war? Be a reconciled...and then be a reconciler.

You can change a life-

Onesimus becomes the bishop of Ephesus. What could your enemies become through the power of you displaying the gospel to them in forgiveness and reconciliation.

Prayer Counselors and Altar