

An Awkward Conversion

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[0 : 00] Well, I'd like us to turn together for a moment back to Philharmon. We've been studying this, we started studying this book last week, we're doing a short study over four weeks, this is part two.

Last week we set the scene a little bit. We saw that this letter was written by Paul from prison, probably in Rome, probably in the early 60s in the first century.

He's writing to Philharmon who lives in Colossae or near Colossae and he's someone whom Paul has known for some time and he has a prominent role in the church there.

The reason the letter is being written is all about a man called Onesimus, a slave in Philharmon's household who had run away but has now come to faith and has been a great help to Paul.

Now Paul is sending Onesimus back to the man that he ran away from and Paul's asking Philharmon to receive him not just as a slave but now as a beloved brother in Christ.

[1 : 08] I don't have my clicker for the slides so I just have to ask you at the back to move it for me at the moment. So if we can flick over to the next slide. I want us to focus on these verses.

We can read again from verse eight. We'll focus on verses eight to seventeen but we can just read verses eight to ten as our text if you like. Accordingly though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do all what is required yet for love's sake I prefer to appeal to you.

I, Paul, an old man and now a prisoner also for Christ Jesus. I appeal to you for my child Onesimus whose father I became in my imprisonment.

Last week we were saying that this letter is written really in a very delicate situation and it's a window into the complex realities of real life church.

Wonderful. This is the source of all my power. So it's a delicate situation that this has been written into and what we've been saying with this series is that it's a window into real life church and all the complexities that that can be.

[2 : 21] So our title tonight is an awkward conversion and our three headings are real people, real maturity and real theology.

So the first of these is real people. To help us see the awkwardness of the circumstances surrounding Philomon, I'm going to start by doing something a little bit different and something that's maybe a little bit strange.

I want you to all imagine that Paul and Philomon are meeting on Zoom. Now, I know that's a bit weird, but just bear with me. So picture in your minds, Paul and Philomon have just begun a Zoom call.

Paul says, hi, Philomon. Great to see you. It's been ages. Philomon starts to speak. No sound is made. So Paul says, Philomon, you're muted. You need to unmute yourself and then follows the awkward unmuting moment that we've all become accustomed to.

Philomon then speaks, Paul, it's so good to see you. I've been meaning to catch up for ages. We heard that you've been arrested. Really hope you're okay. We've been praying for you.

[3 : 25] Paul replies, thanks so much, Philomon. I'm doing fine really despite everything. I've got Mark, Aristarchus and Luke and the others. They're nearby, so they're a huge help. Listen, I wanted to get in touch because you will not believe who has been converted.

You will never guess who it is. Brilliant, replies Philomon. Give me a second to sit down at the desk. Oh man, this place is a mess. Did you hear that my servant Onesimus did a run-out?

I can't believe it. I am so disappointed and to be honest, I am really annoyed. I was so good to him. You know, a lot of the guys around here who have got slaves, they're not very nice to them.

They can be pretty hard on their guys, but as a Christian, I've always tried to teet out household slaves well. I was so good to Onesimus. I gave him a good salary. I made sure he was well fed.

I even made sure that he could come along to church with us, not that he ever paid much attention. But a few weeks ago, he just took off and now it looks as though some money is missing and all my papers and accounts are a complete mess without him.

[4 : 29] I cannot believe that he did that to me. The guy is useless. I am absolutely raging. Anyway, that's me at the desk.

Who's the new convert? Paul takes a deep breath and replies, Onesimus. Now, that, of course, is a fictional Zoom call, but I hope that it captures the awkwardness of Onesimus's conversion.

And there's several reasons why it's awkward. It's awkward because there's a history between Philharmon and Onesimus. They had a relationship in the past, but that's now been damaged.

It's awkward because there's distance between them in the here and now. They're separated and alienated. And it's awkward because there needs to be a future together.

The alienation needs to be addressed, but achieving that reconciliation is probably not going to be easy. And the point we'll keep coming back to in this series is that all of this is so relevant to real life in the church today.

[5 : 38] When you have real people, real congregations, real life pressures, these situations, these awkward situations are inevitably going to arise.

Real life church will sometimes be awkward. But all too often when we face those kind of situations, we can conclude that the best thing to do is just accept the awkwardness and carry on.

So Paul could easily have thought, well, Onesimus is miles away from Philharmon now. Their paths are probably never going to cross. We could just get on with life and they can just carry on as it is.

And we can be the same.

People can make a mess of things and relationships can be broken down. People can get hurt. And yet it's so easy to think, well, the least awkward solution is just to act as if the problem isn't there.

But we need to recognize that that's an enormous mistake because it's basically saying, I'd rather be permanently broken than be temporarily awkward.

[6 : 46] Because dealing with brokenness is awkward because when we do so, we are exposing ourselves to all the vulnerability that that awkwardness will involve.

But if we just avoid the awkwardness and avoid the vulnerability, then that means that things will inevitably just stay broken.

That's true medically. If you want to get a diagnosis and treatment, then you need to go through the awkwardness of an examination. It's true in terms of education.

If you want to learn something, you need to go through the awkwardness of being the one who hasn't a clue and who needs to be taught. And it's definitely through spiritually to fix broken relationships and difficult situations we need to be ready to make ourselves vulnerable to the awkwardness that that might bring instead of trying to pretend it's not there.

The key thing I think that we need to remember is that in situations like this, choosing to stay broken in order to avoid being temporarily vulnerable is bonkers.

[8 : 01] But addressing awkward situations like this doesn't mean kind of charging in and just fixing everything. These situations need to be handled with great care.

And that's exactly what we see in Paul, which brings us to the second heading, real maturity. I think Paul's handling of this whole situation is remarkable.

And we see that if we look a little bit more closely at the language that he uses in this kind of middle section of the letter. I want to notice three things under this heading.

How Paul describes himself, how he talks about onesimus, and how he speaks to Philomon. So how does Paul describe himself with pop verses 8 to 16 and will highlight certain key things.

There's three phrases in particular that Paul uses to describe himself. Verse 9, he calls himself an old man and he calls himself a prisoner. And then in verse 10, he describes himself as onesimus's father.

[9 : 03] Even in these three terms, there's a lot we could say, I want to focus especially on the fact that Paul describes himself as an old man. And the reason I want to focus on that phrase old man is not so much because Paul is near the end of his life, but it's more because I think Paul displays great maturity in what he says.

This maturity is crucial for resolving this awkward situation. And it's crucial in our lives as Christians as well.

Now, to help us think about this, I am going to teach you two Gaelic words. These are two Gaelic words that you will probably know, but if you do not know them, you will be delighted that you do know them in a moment.

So these two Gaelic words are Badaach and Kayach. Does anyone know what they mean? I know some of you do. They mean an old man and an old woman.

So these are two Gaelic words you want to learn, Badaach and Kayach. When Paul speaks here, he says, I'm a Badaach. He's an old man. In other words, he's a mature Christian.

[10:19] And that has a big influence on what he says. So how does he talk to Onesimus? Well, in verse 10, you'll see he uses the phrase, my child, in describing Onesimus.

And he refers to himself as Onesimus' father. That kind of language is revealing a strong paternal care in Paul. He sees himself as Onesimus' father.

He looks upon him as his child. Elsewhere in the New Testament, Paul does exactly the same thing in regard to Timothy and Titus. Then in verse 11, we see that Paul talks about Onesimus being useless and then useful.

That's actually a very clever use of words because the name Onesimus actually means useful. Here Paul is showing that he's got a kind of broader perspective.

He's got the maturity to see that, yes, Onesimus was useless. He let Philomondown. But that uselessness of that moment is not the end of the story.

[11:21] He can see that there's no great potential in Onesimus to be useful. And then in verse 12, when he talks about sending Onesimus back, he says, I'm sending my very heart.

And down in verse 16, you can see he describes him as a beloved brother, especially to me. And this language reveals a really strong family instinct in Paul.

It's always looking at Onesimus and Philomondown as his descendants, as his family. And just as an old man can look down on his children and grandchildren and see part of him in them, Paul sees part of himself in Onesimus and Philomondown and he seeks to bring them together.

Now, all of this is pointing us towards a fascinating emphasis in the New Testament that I think we very often neglect today.

So let me ask the question, when we describe other Christians, what do we tend to say? Well, we say things like our church family, our brothers and sisters, our fellow believers, our fellow Christians.

[12:33] Do we ever describe other Christians as our parents or as our children? Yet that's exactly what Paul is doing here.

And here we're being reminded of the fact that in the Christian church, there is always a desperate need for buttocks and kayaks. And what I mean by that is the fact that each new generation of Christians needs the support, the care and the wisdom of those who are further on in their faith. And that makes perfect sense because the journey that we embark on as Christians is one that takes us from immaturity to maturity.

You must never forget that the CV for becoming a Christian is completely blank. In other words, no one becomes a Christian because they already know this or they've already experienced that or they've already achieved this, that and the next thing.

We only ever become Christians because of what God does for us through Jesus and in us by the Holy Spirit. And for that reason, the Bible does not describe a new believer as a graduate who has just qualified.

[13:47] It describes a new believer as an infant who has just been born. And if you think of any newborn baby, what is the one thing that that baby cannot survive without?

Other people. The journey to maturity is totally dependent on mature people helping us along.

As true in life, Paul is reminding us that it's exactly the same in the church. That's why the Christian church always needs to be an intergenerational body of people.

So if you're a younger Christian, how is it that you know Jesus? It's because of the Botox and Chiox that God raised up before you and through whom you heard the message of Jesus.

And if you are an older Christian, how is that message of Jesus going to continue into generations to come? It is through the new generation that God is raising up.

[14:52] The whole advancement of the gospel and the success of the mission of God in Jesus Christ is bound up in the fact that we are all fathers, mothers, children, grandparents in the faith.

Now, as I say all that, the key thing is not actually age. The key thing is maturity. So in the Christian church, often the Botox and the Chiox will be old men and women, but not always.

And a good example of that is Paul. So with Philharmonic, how old do you think Paul was when he wrote this letter? Do you know? Well, you can guess in your mind, but we're not 100% sure, but it's probably that he was about 55.

It's the same age as Derrick or just about. So from my perspective, of course, that's ancient, but for many of you, I'm sure that still seems young.

And Paul at 55, even at that age, he'd been a mature Christian for a long time, a long time. So you don't need to be in your 80s to be a spiritual father or mother to someone coming behind you.

[16:07] It's just a case of being further on in your journey to maturity in the faith. That can be someone in their 30s. Sometimes it can be even younger than that.

So if you're a younger Christian, you need Botox and Chiox. So please look at the more mature Christians around you, not just as brothers and sisters, but as fathers, mothers, grannies, grandpas, and please spend time with them and get to know them because they will teach you many important things.

They'll teach you how to pray. They'll tell you about God's faithfulness in their lives. They'll help you read the Bible. They'll be able to share about all the big changes in life, becoming an adult, getting a job, getting married, having children, serving in the church, suffering loss, facing illness.

The Botox and the Chiox have walked all these paths before you, and they are a brilliant help. And if you are a Botox or a Chiox, please look at younger Christians as your precious children and please remember that they need you.

They need to know that you're there for them, that you've got their back, that you're praying for them, and that you love them. Now, that doesn't mean having all the answers.

[17:27] Even Paul didn't have all the answers. It just means that every new Christian in this church has an army of mothers, fathers, grannies and grandpas ready to help them as they begin to grow.

And if we think like that, we realize that an older generation in the church is not an inconvenience that's out of touch. And we realize that a new generation in the church is not a threat.

We are a family where every generation is dependent on the next. But maybe you're asking yourself the question, well, how do I know which one I am? Am I still new and needing help, or am I further on and able to provide help?

I think the answer to that question is that unless you are a very, very new convert or unless your foot is on the doorstep to heaven, you're probably both.

And so you may feel like you still need the help of those who've gone before you. That's absolutely true. But you can still also give help to those who are coming behind. It's all a brilliant reminder that God's design for his church is one where we all need each other.

[18:39] And that, of course, is why reconciliation in this awkward situation is so important, which brings us to the language that Paul uses in addressing Philimon.

So how does he speak to him? Well, I want you to notice two things. First of all, I want you to see that Paul shows great maturity in the request that he makes towards Philimon.

Notice the language in verses eight and nine or nine and ten. Nine and ten it is. He speaks about appealing to Philimon. So yes, he has the authority to demand Philimon to do what he wants, but he deliberately chooses not to do that.

And he explains that more in verse 14. He says, I'm looking for your consent. I don't want you to do anything out of compulsion. I want you to act on your own accord.

Here Paul is showing deep respect towards Philimon. He recognizes not an easy situation for him, but he appeals to him to follow a certain course of action.

[19:48] Now I think this is a very good example of a mature use of authority. Paul as he says himself here, he has the authority to demand the outcome that he wants, but he deliberately refuses to do that.

Instead, he reasons with Philimon and he makes an appeal to him and in doing so he shows him great respect. And I think this is a great reminder that real authority is not about forcing someone to do something so that they're coerced by you.

Real authority is about showing someone a better path so that they are convinced by you. When we are immature, we tend to think that if I have authority, then people will respect me.

I get thought like that as a more immature man. If I have authority, people should show me respect. Maturity tells us that the truth is the other way around.

If you show people respect, then you will gain authority. So if you want authority, you can't coerce people. Paul is showing us that.

[21 : 03] The moment you impose your authority, you lose it. And I think we've probably all experienced that. When you're in school and your teacher is just really hard on you, they lose your respect.

And any authority they have is one that you will escape from as quickly as you possibly can. Same with a colleague or a boss that tries to exert themselves.

It will instantly antagonize you and make you just want to remove yourself from being under them. If you want to have authority, real authority, you won't gain it if you coerce people.

You will have it if you can convince people. And that's exactly what Paul is doing. Moreover, Paul has the maturity to know that forcing Philharmon into submission is only going to achieve something superficial.

Any goodness that comes by compulsion is going to be shallow. And under the surface, things will still be awkward. But by appealing to Philharmon in this way with respect and sincerity, then it's much more likely to bring real restoration.

[22 : 16] So he shows great maturity in the request he makes of Philharmon. He also shows his maturity in the perspective that Paul has of the situation.

Look at verse 15. I've just highlighted it there for you on the screen. Another Paul is offering an explanation as to why this whole situation has arisen.

And he gives this brilliant contrast, we say, well, maybe the reason he was parted for you for a while was that you might have him back forever. And that's a wonderful perspective to have.

Instead of focusing on the pain and difficulty of the moment, he's looking at the bigger picture. He's recognizing the fact that the brokenness of their circumstances does not need to be the end of the story.

There is always hope of healing. But in making this comment, Paul uses, I think, a very interesting and a very important word.

[23 : 18] It's a word that is crucial, I think, for any attempts that we make to analyze the experiences that we have in our lives.

Can you see the word? It is the word, perhaps.

I think that's a really important word. And I think it's a word that displays great maturity. Because so often we can kind of walk up to situations and see things going on in other people's lives and say, oh, this is why it's happening.

And we confidently offer our own conclusions. Paul, a wise botoch, has the maturity to know that anything he says by way of analysis or explanation in someone else's life should always begin with the word, perhaps.

That's not to say he's guessing. I think he was probably right. But he has the maturity to recognize that he is not the source of all authority and wisdom in circumstances like that.

[24 : 25] And if we're trying to understand the circumstances in our lives or in other people's lives, if we're trying to give people answers, we will be wise to always remember the word, perhaps.

So Paul is respectful, he's warm, he's optimistic in his language. And over it all is a beautiful phrase at the start of verse nine.

I forgot to highlight it. So please forgive me. But I want you to imagine that the first four words of verse nine are highlighted because Paul says, yet for love's sake.

And that phrase, I think, is like an umbrella over everything that he is saying. And these are three words for love's sake, three words that need to be written onto all of our hearts.

Because in awkward situations, so often we choose the wrong sake. Now, what do I mean by that?

[25 : 29] Well, in an awkward situation, we think, well, we need to sort this person out for the sake of justice. Or we need to address this situation for the sake of order.

Or we need to interrogate this person for the sake of truth. Or we need to reprimand this person for the sake of our reputation. Now, these things are not necessarily bad in their appropriate place.

But in awkward situations where people are hurt and where relationships are broken, on their own, these other sakes will only make things worse.

So justice will tell you that anesimist should be punished. Order will tell you that this slave should have known his place. Truth tells you that terrible mistakes have been made. Reputation tells you that you need to be proved right.

Love says, I don't care about any of that. I just want this relationship to be restored.

[26 : 34] In awkward situations, love is the governing principle to which everything else must come second. I've seen this for love's sake, love for Philharmon, love for anesimist, and love for his church.

And the reason he thinks like that is because he sees these people as his children. And when someone makes a mistake at work among your friends in your family or even in church, always ask yourself the question, what would I do if the person who made this mistake was my child?

Throughout this whole situation, Paul is showing us what real maturity looks like. But that raises the question, how could Paul think like that?

And how can we? Well I think the answer to that question is because Paul knew his theology. And that brings us to our last heading.

The apostle Paul is generally regarded as one of the greatest, if not the greatest, theologian in the history of the Christian church. He wrote 13 New Testament epistles and in these he articulates so many of the key truths of Christian theology.

[27 : 58] So you have Romans, an outstanding explanation of how the gospel works, where we learn about justification by faith, adoption and union with Christ. You have Galatians speaking about our freedom from the law through faith in Jesus.

You have Ephesians telling us about the eternal, predestinating love of God and the restoration of humanity across the dividing lines of Jew and Gentile.

You have Colossians speaking about the cosmic rule and authority of Jesus. You have Corinthians explaining the unity of the church, the gifts of the Holy Spirit and the beauty and greatness of love.

You have Philippians explaining the incredible journey that Jesus undertook from heaven all the way to the cross and the joy that that brings to us now.

All of Paul's letters are bursting with amazing theology. And what we need to recognize is that the letter which proves that Paul is a truly great theologian is not Romans, not Galatians, not any of these.

[29 : 09] The letter which proves that Paul is a great theologian is Philemon. Now, how is that?

Well, if we ask the question, what is the acid test of a great theologian?

Is it how much you know? Is it how many books you've written? Is it how many conferences you've spoken at? No.

The acid test of a great theologian is how you treat other people. That's why when Jesus speaks about the day of judgment in Matthew 25, he doesn't say a word about your theological knowledge. Instead, he asks whether your theology has changed the way you treat other people. That's why in John 13, he said, by this, all people will know that you're my disciples if you have love for one another.

[30 : 11] That loving one another is absolutely the acid test. And of course, Jesus himself is the ultimate example of that. And it is this letter to Philemon that shows us that Paul's theology has not just filled his head.

It has transformed the way he treats other people. So Paul, the theologian, has a doctrine of anthropology.

So that means that his theology doesn't just help him understand God. It helps him understand people. And he looks at Onesimus and he knows that this is a man made in the image of God, but who has been broken by sin and who desperately needs Jesus.

So when he met this runaway slave, he did not shun him. He came alongside him and shared the good news of Jesus with him. Paul the theologian has a doctrine of the atonement. That means he knows that the cross is fully capable of forgiving sin and restoring sinners.

So he looks at this useless runaway slave and he knows that there is hope for him. Paul the theologian has a doctrine of sanctification. That means he knows that salvation is not the end of the journey.

[31 : 19] It's just the start. And that sanctification is progressive. That means that he knows that Onesimus is not the finished article. He's got a long way to go, but he's not completely useless anymore.

He can most definitely be useful in the future. Paul the theologian has an ecclesiology. That means he knows that the cross does not just bring vertical reconciliation between us and God.

It also brings a horizontal reconciliation between us and which unites us as brothers and sisters and Jesus. That's why this awkward tension between Philemon and Onesimus needs to be resolved.

The relationship needs to be restored and for Paul, regarding a fellow Christian as an enemy and remaining divided from them is absolutely unthinkable.

And Paul the theologian has an eschatology. So he knows that there's a day of judgment coming and he knows that God alone is the judge.

[32 : 22] And that means he knows that he is not the judge. Neither is Philemon and God is most definitely big enough to sort out everything on that final day.

Paul's theology has transformed the way he treats others. And that means that the best theologians will be the kindest of people because they know that we are to display God's goodness as his image bearer.

The best theologians will be the most patient mentors because they understand that sanctification is a process. The best theologians will be the most forgiving church members because they know that grace is never deserved.

They will be the most optimistic evangelists because they know that Jesus is risen and that the Holy Spirit is empowering us. And they will be the least judgmental because they know that God alone is judge.

And if I am not these things, then I'm an immature theologian. And the knowledge I have doesn't count for much.

[33 : 32] Paul sums this up incredibly powerfully in a verse that's written about theologians. He says, if I have prophetic powers and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith so as to remove mountains but have not love, I'm nothing.

For all of us, we're actually all theologians, but we all need that theology to shape the way we treat other people.

So in this letter, we see real people, real maturity and real theology. I want to conclude with two very brief questions. One, what would an awkward convert look like today?

An ex, an addict, someone who's transitioned, an enemy, someone who's treated us badly or who we just really struggle with.

In these situations, our prayer needs to be, by God's grace, let us show God's grace. Onesimus must have felt very awkward coming back to Philemon, but one thing he knew was that he had Paul's heart and Paul had his back.

[35 : 03] And we wanted to always be the case that whoever connects with us as a church, that they would come away knowing that they have got our very heart and we have got their backs.

The second question is, do you feel like the awkward one? Maybe you do.

Maybe you feel like everybody else has got it together or is further on than you are and that you are the awkward one when it comes to church and faith and Jesus.

Well, one of the amazing things that this letter is teaching us is that nothing and no one is ever too awkward for Jesus.

And the truth is we're all awkward. We all have baggage. It's just that some people's mess is easier to hide. But no matter how awkward you feel about yourself, no matter how much you feel like the odd one out, no matter how much you feel like everyone else is in a better place than you, Jesus is saying, you have got my very heart.

[36 : 15] You have a place in my family. You are so precious to me. And the reason we know that is because our three headings apply to Jesus as well.

So Jesus is the most realistic of all people. He knows your story, every detail of it. Nothing will shock him.

Jesus is the most mature person of all. That means he's not a never an idiot. He's not going to jump to conclusions about you. And Jesus is the greatest theologian of all.

And that means that he knows when it comes to his grace, there is enough for you. When it comes to his family, there is room for you.

When it comes to his love, Jesus is saying, I died for you too. You will never, ever be too awkward for him.

[37 : 24] I guess the question we all have to ask is, is Jesus too awkward for you? Let's pray. Dear Father, we thank you so much that everything you teach us is not just for our heads, but it's to shape our lives.

And we pray that in every way that we can, we would show your love to others, that we really would be those who love you and who love our neighbor.

Please keep writing your truth on our hearts until it transforms the way that we treat other people. Forgive us for the times that we have been, just for the times we failed to show your goodness to others in our lives.

And instead, may we see people as you see them. May we love people in the way that you love them. And may we just show your kindness and goodness in every way that we can in the week ahead.

Please draw us all closer to you and closer to each other. We need you and we need one another so much. Amen.