

Refreshing Obedience

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[0 : 00] Now, where I'm from, north of Seattle, our typical greeting, our greeting exchange is very similar to the typical greeting exchange of Scotland.

So you would say, how are you? And I say, I'm fine. I'm fine. Are we fine?

This morning someone used the phrase in the morning service, the pandemic blues. I've got a bit of a pandemic blues, to be honest with you. I'm tired.

Drury weather, short days of daylight, lots of darkness, rain, cold. I'm tired. I suspect you're tired as well.

And when we've got the pandemic blues, what we really want is to be refreshed. I wonder what comes into your mind when you think about being refreshed, a weekend on a beach in Spain, or sunny days and hill walks in the highlands, or a nice hotel room with Netflix and room service.

[1 : 10] Those are all good. And they can be very refreshing, but Paul's idea of refreshment is something entirely different. Now, Paul's writing this from prison, not a comfortable situation.

He's got worse than a case of the pandemic blues. But what he longs for in being refreshed isn't beaches or hotel rooms, it's not even his freedom.

It's Philemon's obedience. He says, refresh my heart and the Lord by doing what he's asked him to do.

And at the beginning of the letter, he said that Philemon's gospel-shaped manner of life has actually refreshed the hearts of all the saints in his church community.

There's something about Christian obedience that actually refreshes us and our whole community. Why is that?

[2 : 05] Well, it's because of a catastrophe. Catastrophe is a Greek word that we've brought into English. It's two Greek words combined that mean down and turn.

It's a downturn. A catastrophe is a sudden downturn of events that leaves your life totally changed forever. There's no going back to the way things were before the catastrophe.

It has a ripple effect on your life. Years ago, I knew a man who was in a catastrophic car collision and he became a paraplegic for the rest of his days.

His life couldn't be the same after that catastrophe. For many of you, this pandemic has been a catastrophe and you may have lost loved ones like stolen from you and life just won't be the same. Any loss of a loved one is a catastrophe and it leaves a hole that means your life is shaped differently from now on. Now the reason for this letter, right?

[3 : 13] The reason for the letter is in verse 17. It calls writing to Philemon to say, except him as you would accept me. Receive Philemon your runaway slave as if he were an apostle of Christ.

But the reason behind the reason is a catastrophe. Not the catastrophe of a runaway slave, not a catastrophe of perhaps him fixing the books or stealing something from Philemon, but the catastrophe of the crucifixion of Jesus Christ.

J.R.R. Tolkien, my favorite author by so far, he actually came up with a new word to describe the crucifixion of Jesus. He called it the eukatastrophe.

That's just catastrophe with the Greek prefix EU put before it and that means good, the good catastrophe, the good downturn.

Is the crucifixion of Jesus, the gospel, the good news that Jesus died for you in your place for your sins so that you might live to God is the good catastrophe.

[4 : 21] It was the most tragic event in human history, but it was the most glorious event in human history and the world and all of our lives can absolutely never be the same.

So we're going to look tonight at how the gospel, this good catastrophe demands something of us. It demands that our life be shaped differently now.

Because the gospel happened, our lives must take a new gospel shape. That's why Paul's asking for Philemon's obedience. What does he want him to do?

As I said, verse 17 is really the center of this letter. It's the whole point. It's the impetus for Paul writing this. He says, receive him as you would receive me.

Paul wants to be refreshed by Philemon's obedience to this request. Before we can get into discussing this refreshing obedience, then we need to deal with the gospel with this good catastrophe.

[5 : 25] Paul's making a gospel-shaped request for gospel-driven obedience. So here are the three points. I don't know how to preach a sermon. It's not a three-point sermon I'm discovering, but it makes it easy for me.

Here's three points then. Number one, Jesus is building a family that the world can't explain.

Number two, family obedience isn't optional.

And number three, Jesus is more committed to your obedience than you are. So number one, Jesus is building a family that the world cannot explain.

Receive him as you would receive me. That doesn't make any sense without the gospel. What could possibly form a community, a family, where a slave and a thief is received with the same honor and dignity as a messenger sent from the risen Christ?

The world has no way to explain that. Without Christ, the world's and our natural, sinful bent is toward social hierarchy, toward the rich and powerful getting honor and the weak and poor and oppressed getting shame.

[6 : 44] Darwin's theory of natural selection, the survival of the fittest, is the sinful posture of all of our hearts without Christ toward everyone else, survival of the fittest.

It's cutthroat. But Jesus is building a family so completely counter-cultural to that cutthroat survival of the fittest, worldly culture that we all know so well.

The gospel is the good news that Jesus died in your place for your sins so that we can have life to God together.

As we've all sinned and were only bought, were redeemed from that slavery to sin by the blood of Christ, then in the family of God, there's no room for classism or racism or favoritism or I'm better than you ism.

The blood of Christ is the great equalizer of humanity. That's why in Galatians Paul can say, there's neither Jew nor Greek, there's neither slave nor free, there's no male and no female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

[8 : 00] Through the gospel then, Jesus is building a family that the world can't explain, a family marked by showing each other radical honor, a family marked by dignifying each other as children of the king of the universe, a family marked by lifting up our brothers and sisters by encouragement, by forgiveness, grace.

In verse 16 Paul says to Philemon, now you can have an usmous back, not as a slave but as a brother, both in the flesh and in the Lord. Don't overlook that language of family.

It's easy to, especially in the south and the states where I've spent the last four or five years, you walk into church and everyone's, hey brother, everyone's brother, right, or sister. It's not bad at all, it's a good thing actually.

But it's easy to make it almost flippant, isn't it? We read over the language of brother and sister in the New Testament. But Paul's actually saying this family tie, this brotherhood, it doesn't just extend to the privileged and the noble and the rich, etc.

That's counter-cultural. The world knows nothing of that. The poor, the weak, the unprivileged, the working class, the oppressed, in Christ, we are all more truly than your brothers and sisters.

[9 : 16] We're brothers and sisters in Christ. That's amazing. But not only that, this new family that Jesus is building is an eternal family. It's a forever family.

Look at verse 15. For this perhaps is why he was parted from you for a while, that you might have him back forever. No longer as a bond servant but more than a bond servant as a beloved brother.

Through the gospel, Jesus is building a family that the world can't explain. But you might say, okay, hold on. I haven't actually seen Paul deal with the gospel in Philemon.

We see its kind of effects, but is the gospel in there? It is. Look at verse 3. I love this. Verse 3, grace to you in peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Every email I think I've received in the last nine months has started with something like, you know, hi John, hope you're doing well in these unprecedented times. That's not what Paul's doing. [10:17] When he says grace to you in peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, that's not just a customary greeting. It's the gospel. It's the foundation for everything Paul's about to say.

Let's just look at it for a minute, kind of phrase by phrase. Grace to you from God. God himself loves you. When he gave you the gift of salvation by sending his son to pay the price for your sins, grace and peace.

What do we get from the free gift? We get the very peace of God. Jesus reconciled us sinners to the holy God whom we have offended. But not only do we get peace with God, we, because of that great equalizer of humanity that is the blood of Jesus, we get peace with each other now too.

So grace and peace to you from God our Father. No longer is he merely the deity whom we have offended. We've been given the spirit of adoption in Christ and are counted as sons and daughters of God.

We get to call him Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. We don't just get a big brother in Jesus though we do get that.

[11:36] We get a Lord. We get a master. We get an anointed eternal King. And that is the gospel.

Paul opens his letter with that remarkable greeting because it's the basis for everything that he's about to say. And just like this church, the church that met in Philemon's house only existed because of that gospel.

The gospel was the good catastrophe that gave birth to the church as it were. So if you're a Christian, grace and peace is your objective reality.

Whether you feel that or not, as a Christian, grace and peace is your objective reality. In Christ we have grace. In Christ we have peace with God and we can have peace with others.

But how does that grace and peace? How does that objective reality enter into our experience subjectively?

[12:39] We'll only experience grace and peace with God and with each other and in our hearts when our lives conform to the shape of the gospel through obedience to Christ.

That's how it works. Without gospel obedience, we won't experience grace. It'll feel like toil. Without gospel obedience, we won't experience peace.

It'll leave us weary. This gospel, this grace and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ is the means of Jesus building a family that the world can't explain.

What a privilege to be a part of that family, isn't it? Now, point number two, family obedience isn't optional. Now, when it comes to Christian obedience, I think we can all tend toward two ends of a spectrum.

On the one end we say, here's my duty. Even though I don't feel like it, I'm just going to do the right thing because it's the right thing to do but I don't want to, but I'm going to.

[13:42] On the other end of the spectrum we say, well, real love is really from the heart and so I'm not going to do the thing that is good until I really can feel it from the heart.

We all know both ends of these spectrum. Think about reading your Bible. We all know it's the right thing to do. We need to spend time with God through His word. Sometimes we do it like a duty and it's just ticking a box and our heart's not in it.

Sometimes we might say, well, I don't want to do it until my heart's really in it and we don't do it.

Now, hear this, that's me on almost a daily basis is one end of that spectrum or the other.

I struggle with this. It's a real struggle for us but this is sub-Christian. Both of those ends of the spectrum are sub-Christian.

There is a gospel third way. Thomas Chalmers called it the expulsive power of a greater affection. When the gospel comes to us in the old language, when we apprehend the mercy of God in Christ and when we're overwhelmed by the love of Christ, we do our duty both because our Lord commands it and because we delight to obey our Lord and to please Him.

[14:58] Paul calls that in Romans 12, transformation. It's what the gospel does to us at the heart level. It transforms us into a gospel-shaped manner of life.

Paul acknowledges this reality in verse 14 in Philemon. He says, I prefer to do nothing without your consent in order that your goodness might not be by compulsion but of your own accord.

Paul is using all of his persuasive skills in this letter and you'll see he goes from being less direct to more direct as the letter goes.

He says, I'm just going to appeal to you but did I mention I'm an old man in prison and he's becoming persuasive and by the end he says, confident of your obedience, sincerely Paul. He gets more direct. He's using all of his persuasive skills to compel Philemon's obedience of his own accord. He wants Philemon to obey from the heart but to actually obey.

[15:59] In the gospel, Jesus says to us, I require obedience of you and I'm giving you a love for me so great that you'll delight in obedience and you'll find it refreshing.

We saw that last week worked out in Derek's sermon, Philemon. Paul could say, receive him as you would receive me because in Christ the Father received us as if we were Christ himself.

Paul could say, if he owes you anything charged that to my account I will pay it because Christ has said to the Father as it were, if he or she owes me anything charged that to my account I have paid it.

That's how the gospel shapes us. In other words, gospel doctrine always leads to gospel culture. The truth of Jesus Christ dying in our place for our sins forms and shapes us into the kind of people who can extend that kind of grace and love to those around us even when forgiveness is costly.

[17:03] What I want us to see is that the gospel does actually require obedience from us. It really does. Paul ultimately isn't saying to Philemon obey me. He's not saying obey Paul ultimately.

What he's saying is obey the gospel. Live like the gospel is true, Philemon. Let the gospel doctrine lead to gospel culture.

Look with me at verses 8 and 9. Accordingly, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do what is required, yet for love's sake I prefer to appeal to you.

Now there's one little word I want us to pay attention to here. It's the word required. Keep bold enough in Christ to command you to do what is required.

There is something required of us. Gospel doctrine must lead to gospel culture. We must live like the gospel is true. Otherwise, what was it all for?

[18:04] Now we see this in the parable that Jesus told of the unforgiving servant. Do you remember that? This servant owed his master a great debt and he went and pleaded and the master forgave this massive debt, unbelievable debt, unpayable.

The master wiped the slate clean. Then that same forgiven servant went and started choking some guy who owed him just a little bit of money.

Do you remember what the master said to this unforgiving servant? He said, you wicked servant, I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. And should you not have had mercy on your fellow servant as I had mercy on you?

Gospel doctrine must lead to gospel culture. If we have been forgiven, we must now forgive. We forgive because we're forgiven to say it another way around.

We humble ourselves for others because the Lord of heaven and earth humbled himself for you. We honor and dignify others because the most glorious person in the universe honors and dignifies us.

[19:15] In other words, the family that Jesus is building will only preach Jesus to the watching world if we actually live like a forgiven bloodbought family.

The gospel requires our obedience. Now I need to say here before we move on, we're not saved because of our obedience. It's really important, and I hope you don't hear me saying that.

We're saved because of Christ's obedience. So when I say the gospel requires our obedience, I don't mean you obey to get saved. I mean we obey because we have been saved.

And that's freeing. I wonder, and I don't know, otherwise I'd get more specific, but I wonder what new green pastures of obedience Christ is calling you to today.

Take that step. Take that step of obedience, just gazing at the gospel in faith, waiting for that transformation, and take the step. His grace will be sufficient for you.

[20:25] It may be hard, but it will refresh your heart, and it will refresh the heart of the saints around you. Now at this point, some of you might be squirming, and I know this because when I was preparing the sermon, I was squirming a little bit inside.

Facing the reality that the gospel demands a response of obedience means also facing the reality of how disobedient we can be to the gospel.

If you're feeling unworthy today, if you're hyper aware of your own disobedience, or if you're feeling discouraged because you want to obey the gospel, you want to grow in holiness, but you just can't seem to get better, then this is really important.

Jesus is more committed to your obedience than you are. That's our third point. Jesus is more committed to your growth in holiness than you are.

Jesus is more committed to your sanctification, to your becoming more like Jesus than you are. How can I say that? Well, look at verse 20.

[21 : 31] Yes, brother, I want some benefit from you in the Lord. Refresh my heart in Christ. There's a tiny little preposition used twice there, the word in.

There's a world of glory in the word in. Benefit from you in the Lord. Refresh my heart in Christ. Because our locations are located in Christ.

We are so united to Christ by the Spirit that it's as if we've had an address change. So maybe I used to be John on Blackford Avenue, now I'm John in Christ.

There's something more real about your location in Christ than your physical geographic location on earth. The Bible, the New Testament is full of this in Christ language.

Here's just a flyover. If you're a Christian, your life is in Christ. Your life is in Christ. Paul says that in Colossians.

[22 : 35] In his first letter, Peter says that our hope is in Christ. Ephesians 2, Paul says we were newly created in Christ. We read that this evening for our call to worship.

Romans 8 says we are free in Christ. Romans 8, 39 says we have and experience the love of God in Christ.

Paul says elsewhere that Christ is the head and we are Christ's body. That's how in Christ we are. That's how united to Christ we are. Is that we form the one person as it were.

Our obedience is in Christ because we are united to Christ. We're so united to Christ that when the Father looks at you, he sees Jesus.

He doesn't see your sin, he sees Jesus's obedience. We're so united to Christ that his obedience is counted as our obedience and our obedience is just counted as the glory of God.

[23 : 36] Like that's Christ in you working. We're so united to Christ that his good is our good and our good is his good.

In other words, Jesus is more committed to your obedience than you are because he's more committed to your good than you are.

We tend to be pretty self-destructive as people. We do all sorts of things physically and spiritually that are harmful to us and are destructive.

But Jesus loves us more than we could ever love ourselves. Jesus is more committed to our good than we are. So friends, if you're discouraged by your own lack of obedience, your own lack of growth in the faith, your own lack of spiritual maturity, your lack of holiness, please hear this.

Jesus is determined to see you in heaven. He'll get you there. As you take that next step in obedience, you may know what that is, then let that truth as you take that step sink into your heart.

[24 : 51] Emmanuel, God with us, is more real than we know. He's with us.

If you can't say that you are located in Christ this evening, you can be. Just receive what he's done for you.

The only thing you have to bring is nothing. You just open your hands, as it were. The empty hands of faith are all that we bring to Christ. And the truth of the gospel will transform you from the inside out.

It's that gospel-driven transformation that brings refreshment to your weary bones, and it refreshes the community, the whole family of God as well.

That kind of obeying because we love Jesus so much, obedience is life-giving. It's deeply refreshing. It's a joy to experience, and it's a joy to see in our brothers and sisters, isn't it?

[25 : 53] So he says, refresh my heart in Christ. Well, this is the end of our series, and it's the end of my sermon. So we've done four weeks in Philemon.

The tiny, tiny letter, four weeks is a lot to do on that. But I couldn't help but wondering, what happened to Onesimus? What happened?

Did Paul said receive him as he would receive me? He implies he wants him to free him and consider him as a brother in Christ and equal in the faith. What happened, though? Did Philemon obey?

Well, we can't know for certain, but around 115 AD, Ignatius of Antioch, an early church father, a pastor, a theologian, he actually wrote that Onesimus, this Onesimus was the bishop of Ephesus, that Philemon freed him and he succeeded Timothy as bishop and pastor of the churches for the Ephesians.

In fact, some have said that Onesimus was the one, this freed slave was the one who actually compiled and collected all of Paul's letters and preserved them for future generations.

[27 : 03] Maybe. I really like to hope that that's true. I really do. But either way, this amazing little letter declares to us the story of our freedom in Christ and of his marvelous family-building, community-shaping, world-changing love for us.

So let's pray and thank him for that love now. Lord Christ, we are moved, moved by your goodness, moved by your kindness.

Moved by the privilege of not only calling you our older brother in the faith as it were, but our Lord, our King.

Thank you for including us in your family. Amen.