

How to be a Real Friend, *Part 4*  
A Study of Philemon 15-17

Introduction:

Good morning! My name is Patrick Gibbs and I am one of the pastors here at MVBC. Pastor Bob is getting a much deserved weekend off. Our message this morning is a continuation of our study through the small Bible letter of Philemon. If you have a Bible, I invite you to turn there. It is very small, probably one page long and it is just before Hebrews in the New Testament. We have been looking at Philemon to learn about friendship. So, let me take just a minute to review what we have learned so far. ► This letter is written by the Apostle Paul from a Roman prison ► to his friend Philemon. Philemon was a man of considerable influence and social standing. A church met at his home, and he was a follower of Jesus, and was led to Christ by Paul himself. ► Philemon owned a slave named Onesimus. Onesimus had run away from Philemon, and it seems that Onesimus owed Philemon some money. In his flight, ► Onesimus somehow met Paul. Paul led Onesimus to Christ, and at some point, Onesimus tells Paul that he was a runaway slave. So, Paul sends ► Onesimus back to his owner with this letter that we have preserved for us in the Bible.

Up to this point, we have learned that real friends ► offer encouragement; ► they offer respect; and ► they offer salvation. And, now we come to a fourth element of being a real friend: ► Offer perspective. That's the big idea of this morning's message: Offer perspective. Perspective is the way we see things. It is our point of view. It is the lens through which we see things. And sometimes, our friends have a perspective we need to see or hear.

A husband and wife came for counseling after 20 years of marriage. When asked what the problem was, the wife went into a passionate, painful tirade listing every problem they had ever had in the 20 years they had been married. She went on and on and on: neglect, lack of intimacy, emptiness, loneliness, feeling unloved and unlovable, an entire laundry list of unmet needs she had endured over the course of their marriage. Finally, after allowing this to go on for a sufficient length of time, the male therapist got up, walked around the desk, and after asking the wife to stand, embraced and kissed her passionately as her husband watched with a raised eyebrow. The woman shut up and quietly sat down as though in a daze.

The therapist turned to the husband and said, 'This is what your wife needs at least three times a week. Can you do this?' The husband thought for a moment and replied, 'Well, I can drop her off here on Mondays and Wednesdays, but on Fridays, I fish.'

That's a perspective that needs some attention. Our perspective is often determined by our knowledge, our experiences, what we are feeling and things that have happened to us before. Sometimes our perspective is completely dead on right; other times our perspective is like looking through a cracked windshield. We see something out there, but it is grossly distorted. So this morning, we are going to see two areas of perspective that Paul offers to Philemon. Paul wants to help his friend have a proper perspective of the current circumstances regarding Onesimus. Paul wants Philemon to catch a glimpse of the bigger picture.

So, let's see what perspectives Paul offers.

I. (Sovereignty)

In verses 15-16, ► Paul writes,

NIV Philemon 1:15 Perhaps the reason he [Onesimus] was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back for good-- 16 no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother. . . .

I am immediately drawn to the phrase, ► "he was separated from you." That sounds odd to me. That seems to imply that someone separated Onesimus and Philemon on purpose. Instead of Philemon being the victim of a crime, Paul seems to want Philemon to see something beyond that.

I think Paul is suggesting that maybe God played a part in the separation of Onesimus from Philemon. The perspective Paul is pointing towards is ► God's sovereignty. He's trying to help his friend see the bigger picture of God's sovereign hand in this circumstance. Sovereignty isn't a word you find in the Bible really. It is a concept about God we get from the Bible as a whole. It is the concept that God rules and controls (or has authority) over everything and everyone. We get this from verses like ► 1 Chronicles 29:11-12.

NIV 1 Chronicles 29:11 Yours, O LORD, is the greatness and the power and the glory and the majesty and the splendor, for everything in heaven and earth is yours. Yours, O LORD, is the kingdom; you are exalted as head over all. 12 . . . you are the ruler of all things. . . .

Or ► Job 42:2,

NIV Job 42:2 "I know that you can do all things; no plan of yours can be thwarted.

This combination of God's authority is called God's sovereignty.

But the idea that God has complete authority over everything and everyone can be a little unsettling, if that's all you now about God. So it might help us to understand a few of the other attributes of God.

- Things like, God created all things.
- God upholds all things. He holds everything together.
- God is above all things. There is nothing greater than God; nothing higher.
- God knows all things. God has revealed many wonderful things to us in the Bible, but some things are way beyond us.
- God can do all things. Nothing is too hard for God.
- God succeeds at all things.

And finally, ► God is good in all things. That is, God is completely good in who He is and He is completely good in what He does. He is completely fair, completely loving, completely pure, completely faithful.

So, as we consider God's sovereignty- his complete authority over everything- it helps us to remember that God is also good and loving and knows everything and is powerful.

But the idea that God has complete authority over everything and everyone does create some questions. Questions like "Do people really have a choice in things or is God just some puppeteer?" Or "Does that mean God also causes evil in the world?" Good questions! Questions that have been debated for thousands of years. So, is there an answer?

Do people really have a choice or is God controlling everything? The answer from the Bible is, "Yes." People have a choice and God's in charge. I can't really explain it, but I know it is true. The Bible is filled with examples of people being held responsible for their own choices and God using those very sinful choices to accomplish his purposes. Somehow God's sovereignty allows for human choice, and yet no choice we make can derail the work that God is doing.

So, if that is true, then the question, "Does God cause evil?" can be answered, "No, God does not cause evil." Evil is the result of our sinful choices. But God clearly allows it. And in all cases, He uses it. He used the evil of the Jewish leaders to crucify Jesus as a payment for my sin- and yours. He used the evil of Joseph's brothers selling him as a slave to save a nation from a famine. The evil in this world is not caused by God, but it is redeemed by Him to accomplish His purposes. From abuse victims who become counselors, to widows who become mentors, to sufferers who become encouragers, to mourners who become activists, God's sovereignty does not allow what he can't redeem for Himself.

So, God is sovereign in that He rules and controls everything and everyone. Everything that has ever happened did so because God either prescribed it or permitted it, including Onesimus running away from Philemon, including Philemon's predicament, including the hardship you are facing right now, including the abuse you endured as a child. It doesn't surprise God, catch Him off guard or cause him to say, "Shoot, I missed that one."

This is what Paul is trying to point out to Philemon, that God is sovereignly working things out. Look again at ►Philemon 15-16, where Paul says,

NIV Philemon 1:15 Perhaps the reason he [Onesimus] was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back for good-- 16 no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother. . . .

Paul is saying, "Maybe God sovereignly allowed Onesimus to run so that I could lead him to Christ and that you might have him back, not only as a slave, but also as a dear brother in Christ. Maybe that is the good that God intended to come from your difficult situation."

You see, offering the perspective of God's sovereignty provides a glimpse of God's goodness working through troubles. And while we don't understand some things, we still have plenty of reasons to trust in God's sovereignty.

So, how can we encourage a friend to see God's sovereignty?

1. ►Be humbly. I am not sure I can stress this enough. Paul himself demonstrates a healthy humility in not presuming to know exactly what God is up to. He demonstrates that humility in the word, ►"perhaps." He doesn't presume to know exactly how God is using this whole situation, but he knows God is sovereignly working for good. Paul is merely connecting some dots that point to God's goodness. But he is using dots that already exist. He's not making things up. Onesimus has already believed.
2. ►Tell your story. Shortly after I became a youth pastor, a volunteer in our youth ministry had a recurrence of lung cancer. He battled for over a year before he died. Along the way, I had the opportunity to watch him suffer. And he did suffer- physically, emotionally and spiritually. But he had a certain confidence that God was in charge. Frankly, I was a little unsettled by it all. A few weeks before he died, he stood before the youth group- about 30 kids- and shared the ride he had been on with God. How God had showed up for Him; glimpses of how God was using his life. He made this statement, "I would never wish this on anyone" and then he paused "unless they get to experience God the way I have these last several months." As a young youth pastor, my perspective was drawn to God's sovereign work- even though there was sorrow- by him being willing to share his story.
3. ►Tell someone who has impacted you how their experience worked in you. I have a friend who has endured some pretty ugly things. But watching this person live and struggle and heal gave me hope. It highlighted some things in my own life that needed addressing. Perhaps God used this person and our friendship to inspire me and motivate me and encourage me to change in ways I did not want to. I saw hope in God's sovereignty that I did not realize existed.
4. ►Balance truth and grace. Is there ever a disconnect between your head and your heart? Your head says, "I know God is in control" but your heart says, "I am scared, lonely, angry and hopeless." I have. And so has the friend you are trying to encourage. Be careful that your perspective that God is sovereign is not a heartless, Christian platitude laced with guilt for the person struggling who is not quite there yet.

I remember being on a men's retreat and I got paired up with a roommate I knew, but not very well. About 6 months earlier, his 8 year-old daughter died from cystic fibrosis. As we spent a few days together, I got to know him a whole lot better. So I asked him, "What encourages you and what discourages you?" He confessed that the most infuriating thing was people coming up and saying things like, "At least she's with Jesus now" or "This must be God's plan and he will see you through it" or "God has a plan in all this." He knew it in his head, but his heart was hurting so much, the sermon from people he barely knew didn't help. In fact, it hurt more. After 6 months, he said it was getting easier to hear. He was

starting to be able to see God working.

When appropriate, offer the perspective of God's sovereignty. ►

## II. (Impartiality)

There is a second perspective that Paul offers in our text; Paul offers the perspective of ► impartiality. By impartiality I mean a perspective that is free of prejudice. No favoritism. No condescension. It's the perspective that every person matters to God, every human bears God's image, and every believer has equal standing before God.

Paul says in ► Philemon 16-17,

NIV Philemon 1:16 . . . He [Onesimus] is very dear to me but even dearer to you, both as a man and as a brother in the Lord. 17 So if you consider me a partner, welcome him as you would welcome me.

Paul is urging Philemon to view Onesimus and treat him with impartiality. He's asking Philemon not to look down on Onesimus as someone inferior. He says, ► "welcome him as you would welcome me." This is a remarkable statement when you consider the lowly social status of slaves in that day. Slaves were considered property. They were bought and sold like animals. They had no rights and there was no human value placed on a slave. On top of that, Onesimus had robbed Philemon; he was a criminal. And, now Paul says, "He has become ► your brother in Christ. Treat him as you would me."

But why? Isn't Philemon worthy of second-class status? He is a slave and he belongs to Philemon. He is a criminal worthy of death for running away. He is a thief. Why should he have the same standing before God as Philemon and Paul? Well, I think we find the answer in other parts of the Bible.

First, we all should be impartial because God is impartial. ► Romans 2:11 says,

NIV Romans 2:11 For God does not show favoritism.

Everybody matters to God.

Second, we all should be impartial because all believers have equal standing before God. ► Galatians 3:26-28 says,

NIV Galatians 3:26 You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, 27 for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. 28 There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

We all matter. We're all important. No one is intrinsically superior or inferior.

And finally, we should all be impartial because God commands impartiality. ► James 2:1 says,

NIV James 2:1 My brothers, as believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ, don't show favoritism.

Now, impartiality does not necessarily remove the consequences of sin. Onesimus needs to confess and make things right with Philemon. And the fact that he was willing to carry this letter himself indicates he is willing to do that. But impartiality does remove any basis Philemon might have for viewing Onesimus as inferior. He is a fellow believer for whom Christ died, and he deserves Philemon's respect, honor, and love.

We all have our own prejudices. Maybe it's the color of someone's skin or their age or their education or the social class or the clothes they wear or the sins they commit. These forms of favoritism are simply sinful and unacceptable. They are offensive to a God who says, "They should matter to you because they matter to Me."

When our middle daughter was a toddler, she had an imaginary friend named Lauren. One afternoon, we stroll into a movie theater and Cassie leads the way into a row of chairs. She picks a chair and I pick the chair next to her. She gets up and moves over one more chair and says, "Lauren is sitting in this chair." I said, "Ok." After a couple of minutes, Cassie says, "Daddy, will you hold the seat down so Lauren can sit down?" So, I'm sitting there doing the "Parent sit." You know, the one you have to do at the ballgame or movie theatre so you kid doesn't get scrounged in the chair. So, I held the seat for a few minutes thinking I had done my obligatory acknowledgement of a person who wasn't there. Then I let the chair go. Cassie was mortified. "Daddy, Lauren is sitting there." So, I apologized and continued the uncomfortable "parent sit." Why did I do that? Why would someone hold an empty chair for a make believe person? Because that "non"-person had value to someone I love. I didn't do it for me. I did it for Cassie. I did it because Lauren had value to her. I did it because someone I love loved Lauren.

By his example, Paul is calling us to be the friend that stands up to favoritism, to be the friend that helps others see through the lens of God's impartiality. How do we do that? By speaking up. By challenging our friend's favoritism when we see it. Offer perspective about impartiality.

►As friends, we sometimes see things in our friends they may not see. A real friend offers perspective when they can like Paul does for Philemon.

Will you pray with me?