

**Dave Johnson**

**Sermon: “God Welcomes Us and Has Paid for Everything” (Philemon 17-18)**

**September 5, 2010**

I grew up in Northern Virginia, and there was an old man in our church we called, “Maj.” None of us knew his real name, but we knew he had served as a major in the U.S. Army and was a veteran of World War II. We all looked up to him. He was a widower of average height, thin and wiry, and he always wore the same tweed jacket and fedora, every single Sunday. During the school year on Sunday’s after church Maj would treat any middle and high school students who wanted to the all-you-could-eat buffet at Shakey’s Pizza Parlor in Annandale (I don’t think it’s there anymore). Parents would drop us off at Shakey’s after church and pick us up an hour or two later. There were usually 15-20 of us sitting around several tables that had been pushed together. We laughed and made trip after trip after trip through the buffet line. As a middle school student with a metabolism through the roof, I felt like I was in heaven—really, when you’re a middle school boy at an all-you-can-eat buffet with a bunch of your goofy friends, can it get any better? While we were eating, Maj would smile and walk around the tables, talking to each of us, cutting up with us, making us feel at home. He always made us feel welcome. I still remember the first time I went, he smiled and was so kind, so glad I was there—and Maj paid for everything for all of us—the buffet, the drinks, all of it for each of us was his treat. I thought there had to be a catch, but there was no catch. *Maj welcomed us and paid for everything.*

Today I’m preaching from one of the Apostle Paul’s lesser read letters, his Letter to Philemon, the shortest of his thirteen New Testament letters. It’s often skipped over. Many people are familiar with Paul’s letters to the Romans or Philippians or Corinthians, but not Philemon. Like the Letter of Jude, Philemon is only one chapter, so if you’re looking to read an entire book of the Bible in one sitting, it’s a good place to start. In fact, you may not know this, but the great nineteenth English novelist Thomas Hardy originally thought of calling his powerful last novel, *Jude the Obscure*, “Philemon the Obscure,” but he didn’t think it worked. Similarly, the Beatles considered entitling their 1968 classic, *Hey Jude*, “Hey Philemon,” but again, it just didn’t seem to fit ☺. Paul’s Letter to Philemon is worth reading because like all his letters, it points us to the gospel.

Philemon was an elder at the Christian church at Colossae, and Paul’s letter to him was written around the same time he wrote his Letter to the Colossians, which is why in many Bible commentaries Philemon is teamed with Colossians. Philemon had a slave named Onesimus, who had stolen from him and run away to visit Paul in prison. Apparently Paul led Onesimus to become a Christian, because he refers to him as “my child, Onesimus, whose father I have become during my imprisonment.”

Paul wrote a letter to Philemon to encourage him to welcome Onesimus back. It is a personal recommendation letter similar to the recommendation letters that Paul Walker and I write each year for students applying for college or seminary, a personal letter on someone else's behalf.

Although Paul's Letter to Philemon is often overlooked, in it we see the gospel very clearly, particularly in verses 17-18 in which Paul appeals to Philemon, "welcome (Onesimus) as you would welcome me. If he has wronged you in any way, or owes you anything, charge that to my account. I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand: I will repay it." In short, *Paul encouraged Philemon to welcome Onesimus back and assured him that he would pay for everything.*

Paul asks Philemon to welcome Onesimus back, as if Onesimus were Paul himself: "welcome (Onesimus) as you would welcome me." Paul and Philemon were good friends as well as brothers in Christ, and Paul knew that if he were released from prison and able to visit Philemon at his home he would be warmly welcomed with much rejoicing and probably a big party, and he asked him to welcome Onesimus completely, no strings attached. In fact, Paul encourages Philemon to welcome back Onesimus *not* as a slave, but rather as "a beloved brother."

Being welcomed is a major part of the gospel, as Paul wrote to the Romans, "Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God" (15:7).

One of the hallmarks of Jesus' earthly ministry was that he welcomed sinners. He ate with them, listened to them, healed them, cared for them, taught them, and was kind to them. Many Pharisees and religious leaders hated this about Jesus. In the fifth chapter of the Gospel According to Luke Jesus is at a banquet at the home of a tax collector named Levi and the Pharisees and religious leaders were furious at him, questioning his motives. Listen to how Jesus responded, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I have come to call not the righteous but sinners to repentance" (Luke 5:31-32). If you are sick or if you are a sinner, or both, you are in the right place today, because Jesus welcomed sinners. He warmly welcomed them, not as slaves but as beloved brothers and sisters, no strings attached. And that changed people's lives.

And the church, the Body of Christ, is to be a place of welcome for sinners, not an irrelevant club for the self-righteous. This summer I read a book of poems by T. S. Eliot, including his poem, *Two Choruses from "The Rock"* (not Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson, an entirely different rock ©). In this poem he poignantly describes how many people consider the church utterly irrelevant to their lives:

In the pleasant countryside, there it seemed  
That the country now is only fit for picnics.  
And the Church does not seem to be wanted  
In country or in suburb; and in the town  
Only for important weddings.

I am glad that Christ Church is a place where sinners are welcome, not held at arm's length—otherwise I would not be interested in serving here—and I *love* serving here. When my family and I came to Christ Church three and half years ago we were warmly welcomed, even though hardly anyone here knew anything about us, a beautiful example of what it looks like to welcome others as Christ has welcomed us. Christ Church is much more than a place “for important weddings.”

Jesus warmly welcomed sinners, before they ever thought about getting their act together, because he knew they could *never* get their act together. Jesus welcomed sinners with open arms, arms that were later stretched to the breaking point and affixed to a cross, and Paul is encouraging Philemon to welcome back Onesimus in spite of the fact that he had run away and stolen from him, and to welcome him back not as a slave, but as a brother.

Jesus' welcoming sinners is a major part of the gospel, but it is not the entire gospel, and in his Letter to Philemon Paul not only urges him to welcome Onesimus back as a brother, he also continues: “If he has wronged you in any way, or owes you anything, charge that to my account. I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand: I will repay it.”

Paul knows that the issues of running away and theft cannot be overlooked or brushed aside, but must be dealt with head on, deliberately, completely. But Paul does not ask Philemon to overlook the ways Onesimus has wronged him. Paul does not ask him to let bygones be bygones or to “just let it go.” Instead, *Paul takes Onesimus' burden upon himself*: “If he has wronged you in any way,” he tells Philemon, “or owes you anything, charge that to my account.” Paul does not expect Onesimus to bear the burden of his wrong doing, but takes his burden upon himself—and that is exactly what Jesus did for us on the cross. Not only did Jesus welcome sinners, he also took the burden of all the ways they had wronged God upon himself and paid what was owed God in their place—and he did this for sinners—while we were still sinners, God proved his love for us once and for all in Jesus' death on the cross (Romans 5:8).

In other words, Paul is showing Onesimus the same kind of love he had received from Jesus Christ. The main leader of the Protestant Reformation, Martin Luther, describes this in his *Preface to Paul's Letter to Philemon*:

“What Christ has done for us with God the Father, that St. Paul does also for Onesimus with Philemon. For Christ emptied himself of his rights and overcame the Father with love and humility, so that the Father had to put away his wrath and rights, and receive us into favor for the sake of Christ, who so earnestly advocates our cause and so heartily takes our part. For we are all his Onesimus[es] if we believe.”

The reality is we are all, like Martin Luther would say, “Onesimuses.” We have sinned against God, and owe him a debt of righteousness we could never ever repay. We often try to run away

from the sin and problems in our lives, looking for a refuge, looking for help, looking for a place we will be welcomed. Many of us, like Onesimus, have troubled souls.

A couple weeks ago I read Arthur Miller's classic 1953 play, *The Crucible*, about the 1692 Salem witch trials. One of the main characters of the play is a married farmer named John Proctor, a Puritan who hated hypocrisy in others but who was also riddled with guilt because of an affair he had had with Abigail Williams, a servant on his farm. Listen to how Miller describes him:

“Proctor was a farmer in his middle thirties... there is evidence to suggest that he had a sharp and biting way with hypocrites... In Proctor's presence a fool felt his foolishness instantly... But as we shall see, the steady manner he displays does not spring from an untroubled soul. He is a sinner, a sinner not only against the moral fashion of the time, but against his own vision of decent conduct. These people had no ritual for the washing away of sins.”

Many of us, like John Proctor, like neither hypocrisy in others nor the hypocrisy of our own lives. Many of us, like John Proctor, have troubled souls. And like the Puritans, we have no ritual for the washing away of sins.

But that is exactly where the gospel comes in. When Jesus died on the cross he took our sin upon himself. All the ways we wronged God and sinned against him were laid on his account. He fulfilled the law in our place. He made it possible for troubled souls to be stilled, for people riddled with guilt to be forgiven and put at ease, for the unwelcomed and unwanted to be welcomed not as slaves, but as beloved brothers and sisters.

A couple weeks ago my family and I watched the season finale of one of our favorite TV shows, *Friday Night Lights*. Two of the main characters are brothers named Billy and Tim Riggins. The older brother, Billy, and his wife had just had their first child. Desperate for money, Billy had started an illegal business stripping stolen cars and selling the parts piecemeal at a huge profit. Tim allowed himself to get sucked into it as well. Eventually the law caught up with them and both were faced with the bleak prospect of a long prison sentence.

In this episode the younger brother, Tim, goes to Billy's house, asks him outside, looks him in the eye and says, “I did it. I did it all. You did not do anything... I stripped the cars. I took the money. I took the frames to the junkyard...” Billy, realizing what Tim is about to do, interrupts, him, “I can't let you do that,” to which Tim continues, “You are my brother. You are all I have. You have a family now. You are a father, and you need to be one. This is my decision. This is what I have decided. This is what's going to happen.” Billy just starts crying, “I'm sorry. I'm so sorry...” while Tim embraces him. Later Tim and Billy drive to the sheriff's office and Tim gives Billy the keys to his pick-up truck and turns himself in to take Billy's blame upon himself, so that the punishment is paid and Billy can be free to enjoy his wife and new son. Tim pays the price, all of it. Billy is off the hook.

That's what happened on the cross. Jesus, who had never sinned at all, not only welcomed us, but also took our punishment upon himself, all of it. He took the initiative; he made the decision; it happened because he determined it would happen. All the things we have done to offend God have been atoned for by Jesus, and all the righteousness we need to have right standing before a holy God has been given to us in Jesus—it has all been charged to his account. And in the same way Paul, in pleading on behalf of Onesimus, wrote to Philemon, "I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand; I will repay it," Jesus, with his own hands nailed to a cross, pled on our behalf, "Father forgive them, they do not know what they are doing." Jesus did all this for the Apostle Paul and Martin Luther, for Philemon and Onesimus, for T. S. Eliot and Arthur Miller, for John Proctor and Abigail Williams, for you and me, for everyone. Jesus welcomed us, and while we were still sinners, died for us.

Jesus also did all this for Maj, the kind old man who had bought so much pizza and drinks for me and many other kids. When I was away at college I found out that Maj had died. I look forward to seeing him in heaven someday, and I'll always be grateful to him because he was one of the first people who showed me what the gospel looks like. Maj understood the gospel—he understood that because of Jesus' death on the cross, we know that God welcomes us and has paid for everything.

Amen.