

Dr. Dave Mathewson, New Testament Literature, Lecture 23, Colossians

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This is Dr. Dave Mathewson in New Testament History and Literature, lecture number 23 on the book of Colossians and Philemon.

All right, let's go ahead and get started.

Today, we'll attempt to finish up Colossians that we started on Wednesday, and then there's one other little book, and this is the one time where we go out of order. Actually, there's going to be one other time, I think. I can't remember off the top of my head, but this is about the only time we go out of order, and I will treat another book right after Colossians, and that is the book of Philemon.

Although, Philemon comes at the very end of Paul's letters, the collection of Paul's letters, because as we said, Paul's letters are generally arranged according to the length of the letter, not according to the order in which they're written. But the reason will become apparent, and that is because Colossians and Philemon actually have a very close relationship to each other, and most likely were written at the same and sent at the same time. So, as I said, we'll break the order that we're following, and I'll treat Philemon right after Colossians because they kind of belong together.

All right, so let's open with prayer, and then we'll finish up looking at Colossians, and then if we have time, move on to Philemon, which is the shortest book that we have that Paul wrote.

Father, thank you again for so graciously communicating your word to us and thank you for those who have preserved and provided a written record of that, Lord, I pray that we'll take seriously this collection of documents that we call your word, and if we confess that they are indeed your word, that we can help, not help, but conform our lives to them, and desire and strive to live in obedience to what is nothing less than your revealed will to your people. And help us just understand a little bit more of that, and understand a little bit more of how to read and to appropriate your revelation to us. In Jesus' name, we pray, amen.

All right, with the book of Colossians, I suggested to you on Wednesday that Colossians was a book written by Paul to address teaching that he was concerned was perhaps on the brink of or on the verge of leading some of the Christians in the city of Colossae astray, and I suggested to you that despite the fact that most people read Colossians when you read Colossians you kind of get mixed signals as far as

what was this teaching that had Paul so concerned and upset. This is something scholars call mirror reading.

By reading a letter you try to find reflected what the occasion or what the problem or the issue was, so in a sense we're mirror reading Colossians, or as the image I used before, we're listening to one end of a phone conversation, we only hear what Paul says and we're trying to figure out what was going on the other end of the line, what was going on with the Colossians that caused Paul to write this letter in the first place. And I suggested to you that most likely Paul is addressing some kind of a deviant or false teaching that perhaps is not quite as severe or has not yet made its way into the church, unlike Galatians. We saw in Galatians Paul was so upset that he skipped the thanksgiving part of the letter and jumped right into the problem at hand.

Where in Colossians, as we saw on Wednesday, you really don't get any hint that anything's wrong until you get to chapter 2. So, if Paul is addressing some kind of deviant or false teaching undermining the gospel, as I think he is, it probably is not quite as serious a situation, or it has not yet perhaps infiltrated the church. I don't mean that the teaching isn't as serious, I mean that the situation is not quite as dire. That is, perhaps there have not been a large number of, or any who have yet given into this teaching, whatever it is, and maybe these teachers aren't even trying to convert or win the Christians.

It's more that the Christians are attracted to this teaching that is present in their culture. And I suggested to you as well that although most think that because there are mixed signals, in one sense there seems to be a strong Jewish element, but there also seems to be a strong asceticism. Don't touch, don't taste, don't handle.

And there also seems to be a mystical element. With this emphasis on the worship of angels and going into things you have seen, there seems to be a visionary or mystical element, and some have looked to a syncretism that is kind of an amalgamation of Jewish and other pagan religious elements and wrapped them all up into one false teaching. But I suggested to you that better is to suggest that this is simply Jewish, and there's no need to look outside of Judaism of the first century for this false teaching.

And even more specifically, it resembles to me the kind of Judaism you see in apocalyptic-type movements that produce books like Daniel, or the kind of books like we find in Revelation, the record of a vision, a vision, an ascent to heaven in a vision of the heavenly realm, or either apocalyptic Judaism, or perhaps this was a group that resembled or could be identified with the Essenes. We talked about the Essenes, from which probably the Qumran community came, and the Dead Sea Scrolls. We talked about them way back at the beginning of class.

They also appeared to have ascetic tendencies and strove for ritual purity. They also seem to be interested in, there seemed to be a number of mystical elements in the Essene teaching and the Qumran documents. So, I don't think there's any reason to look outside of some kind of Judaism that had Paul concerned.

And so now he writes this letter to persuade his readers not to give in to and be deceived by this mystical Judaism that was apocalyptic-type, or Essene, or Qumran-type, but instead to remind them that they had everything they need in Christ, and they did not need this, what the experience of this false teaching had to offer, with its asceticism and its mystical experience. They had everything they needed in Jesus Christ, who, as we saw, Paul said, is the image of the invisible God. He is the creator of all things.

He's the one who inaugurates a new creation. He is before all things. He's the firstborn of all creation.

And so why in the world would they want to give in to or be led astray by this Judaism and its asceticism and its mystical practices and teaching? Now, in chapter 2, to move on, in chapter 2, this is the section, chapter 2 is where Paul really starts to deal more specifically with this teaching and what I want to emphasize from chapter 2, and this is true of chapters 3 and 4 as well, is what has Paul so upset is not primarily their theological deviation, although that does have an upset, but also the ethical implications. So, for Paul, false teaching is not just something that leads you away theologically but leads one astray ethically as well. And in a sense, his approach to this false teaching, his primary problem with it can be summarized in two verses in chapter 2. The first one is found in verses 18 and 19.

Paul says, do not let anyone, again, he's addressing Colossian Christians who perhaps are on the verge of giving in or being attracted to this teaching. He says, do not let anyone disqualify you, insisting on self-abasement and worship of angels, dwelling on visions puffed up without cause by the human way of thinking. Interestingly, there's a Qumran document that portrays someone who apparently has a mystical type of experience that goes to heaven and then comes back and boasts about what he has experienced.

And so, he says, dwelling on visions puffed up without cause by the human way of thinking. And here's the key, and not holding fast to the head, Jesus Christ, from whom the whole body, the church, nourished and held together by its ligaments and sinews grows with the growth that is from God. So, Paul's primary problem with this false teaching is that it has cut itself off from the head, Jesus Christ, which Paul said back in chapter 1, this Jesus is the image of the invisible God.

He is the creator of all things. All things have been created through Him and for Him, and He sustains all things, and He is the firstborn over all creation and the

inaugurator of a new creation. Now, it's this Jesus that the false teaching has cut itself off from.

They no longer grasp or they no longer are connected or hold fast to this head, to Jesus Christ. But then the next verse is verse 23, and Paul says, I'll back up and read verse 21, he says, why do you submit to these regulations from this ascetic type of Judaism, this false teaching? Regulations such as do not handle, do not taste, do not touch. All these regulations refer to things that perish with use.

They are simply human commands and teachings. These indeed have the appearance of wisdom in promoting self-imposed piety and humility and severe treatment of the body, but they are of no value in checking self-indulgence. They are of no value in keeping the sins of self-indulgence and sins of the flesh.

It holds no value in keeping that in check. So, Paul's primary problem then, again, with this false teaching is that it cuts itself off from Christ, and in doing so, therefore, it has no value for actually overcoming sin and overcoming self-indulgence and the sins of the flesh. So, the question is, well, what does? If this false teaching doesn't have the ability with its extreme asceticism, don't touch, don't handle, don't taste, its mystical visionary experiences, if Paul is convinced that cannot overcome self-indulgence and the sins of the flesh, then what can? Chapters 3 and 4 are Paul's answer.

So, starting with chapter... I won't read the whole thing, but notice how he begins chapter 3. So, if you have been raised with Christ, it's not by following the ascetic practices and the mystical experience of this Jewish false teaching, but instead, he says, if you have been raised with Christ, the head that the false teaching cuts itself off from, if you've been raised with Christ, then seek the things above where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your mind on things that are above, not on things on earth, for you have died and your life is hidden with Christ and God. When Christ your life is revealed, then you also will be revealed with him in glory.

So, in a nutshell, that's Paul's summary, is if the false teaching doesn't offer a check on self-indulgence and sin, then what does? Well, it's by setting your mind on things above. It's by recognizing who we are by virtue of belonging to Christ. We've died to these things, and we've been raised and seated with Christ and the heavenlies.

I wonder perhaps if this... notice this emphasis on seeking the things above and seek the things that are in heaven. I'm not sure, but I wonder if that's not in part Paul's own kind of anecdote or response to the mystical visionary experience of the false teachers, that now Paul promotes his own or offers the Christian's own experience, which is a heavenly one, but it comes by virtue of belonging to Christ and by dying with Christ and being raised and seated with Christ. Now the question, what if Paul's solution is that a life that... Paul's answer to the false teaching then is instead of their

asceticism and instead of their mystical visionary experience, is a life lived based on union with Jesus Christ's death and resurrection.

How do we understand chapters one through four? All this language of seeking the things above, and what does it mean to set your mind on heavenly things? I mean, that language itself seems rather mystical and quite odd, until you understand how this whole section functions in its context. The first four verses that I just read of chapter three are kind of the summary, the summary or thesis statement, seek the things above, not the things on earth. Starting with verse five of chapter three all the way into chapter four, Paul will now explain more specifically what that looks like.

What does it mean to seek the things above and not the things on earth? Well, starting with verse five, he says, put to death therefore whatever in you is earthly, fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, greed. On account of these things, the wrath of God is coming on those who are disobedient. But you must rid yourself of all these things, anger, wrath, malice, slander, abuse of speech.

Do not lie to one another. So, what is Paul saying? The things that are on earth, when he says, don't seek the things on earth, he's not talking about physical things, that you shouldn't own a house and you shouldn't own things like that. What he's saying is, that seeking the things on earth is avoiding this list of vices, such as abuse of speech and language and impurity, et cetera, et cetera.

So, when he says, put these things to death, that's what it means to not seek the things on earth. What it means to seek the things in heaven then starts with verse 12. As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, patience, bear with one another, and if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other just as the Lord has forgiven you.

And there's more to it. In other words, Paul's instructions are solely ethical. What it means to seek the things above and not the things on earth is not understood in some quasi-mystical fashion, but is solely ethical.

Paul says, one who seeks the things above lives life in a certain way here on earth. One who does not seek the things on earth lives life in a certain fashion. That is, they avoid the kind of vices that he lists, starting with verse five.

So that's why context is so important. If you took the first four verses of chapter three, you could be led to the conclusion that Paul is advocating kind of a mystical type of experience on his own, or you might be perplexed. What does it mean to seek the things above in heaven where Christ is and not to seek the things on earth? What does that look like? Well, fortunately, Paul tells us, starting in verse five.

It doesn't mean that you have some mystical experience that takes you away to heaven. It means that you live your life in an appropriate manner here on earth. Two other things about chapters three and four.

The first one is, to notice again the language of the old self and new self. In verses nine and ten, Paul justifies their behavior that he wants them to follow by saying, verse nine, do not lie to one another because you have taken off the old self with its practices and you have clothed yourself with the new self, which is being renewed in the knowledge according to the image of its creator. Now, first of all, notice Paul's use of clothing imagery, which was common imagery to use ethically to compare the virtues that one should put on with certain clothing.

But also, Paul uses this language of old self and new self, and we said, what Paul means by that, the old self is not some ontological part of my being that I get rid of and something that ceases to exist physically or spiritually or ontologically inside of me, but I take it that the old self refers to my entire person, physically, spiritually, emotionally, etc., my entire person within the realm of sin and under the influence of this present evil age, of which Adam is the head. So, Adam being the human being that plunged humanity into sin, Adam is now portrayed as the head of humanity, a sphere of influence that is characterized by sin and death and slavery to sin and death. Whereas the new self, now that Paul says to put on, is now who we are in Christ.

It's who I belong to this new sphere, this new realm of influence characterized by righteousness, life, and the Holy Spirit. That's what I take it Paul means when he says, you have put on the new self. But notice one other interesting thing here, notice the language of the image.

When Paul goes on and says, this new self is being renewed according to verse 10, this new self is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator. What does that language remind you of? This new self is who I am in Christ, belonging to this sphere, this realm of influence that is characterized and dominated by righteousness and life through the Holy Spirit. When Paul says, this is being renewed according to knowledge in the image of its creator, what does that language remind you of? That language, knowledge, image, creator.

You have to go way back. Genesis chapters 1 and 2, being created in the image of God. Very good.

So, what happens is, what Paul seems to be suggesting, he's partly assuming the theology of creation and going back to Genesis. What Adam failed to do, Adam created in God's image, who was to reflect God's glory and his rule over all creation, where Adam failed, now is realized by being in Christ. And here we see part of the already but not yet.

We're already part of this new humanity in Christ, yet Paul can say, it's however still being renewed in the image of the one who created. So the image of God from Genesis 1 and 2, which was ruined because of sin, is now beginning to be renewed in Christ Jesus, the new Adam. The true image of God.

Perhaps we should connect this back to chapter 1. Remember the Christ hymn? Jesus Christ is the image of the invisible God. What Adam failed to image God and instead sinned, now Jesus, the new Adam, does reflect perfectly God's image, and we do as well. The image is renewed and restored in us by virtue of belonging to Christ, who is the image of the invisible God.

So, there's probably Adam and creation, Genesis 1 and 2, lurking in the background of Paul's understanding of the old self and the new self. One other thing with chapters 3 and 4, and especially chapters 3, is again, you cannot miss Paul's indicative imperative, or remember we said the indicative imperative in Paul, where Paul makes rather absolute statements, such as you have died to sin, which is a rather strong and absolute statement, yet then he'll turn around and qualify that with commands, yet you still must put sin to death. That's part of Paul's tension between the already and not yet, between what has already happened by virtue of being incorporated into Christ, but because we still live in this present evil age, what still needs to take place through this process of renewing.

So, for example, in verse 3, the indicative, again I'm in chapter 3 of Colossians, Paul says, for you have died to Christ. That's a rather absolute statement. By virtue of belonging to Christ, who himself has died, we also share in his death.

So, by virtue of belonging to Christ, we also have died. Yet, Paul will turn around in verse 5 and say, therefore, put to death. So, the first one is based on the already, by virtue of belonging to Christ, and the breaking in and inaugurating of the kingdom, and the salvation that God now provides, but the not yet requires the imperative.

This is not automatic and absolute yet, so that requires to be balanced by the imperative. Or again, in verse 10, Paul says, you have already put on the new self. So, this new self, that is who I am in Christ, this new humanity, this new realm of influence that I belong to, created by Christ, characterized by righteousness and life, I have already put that on, yet notice a couple of verses later, he says, therefore, put on, using the same imperative.

Again, balancing out the indicative with the imperative, or balancing out the already aspect of our salvation in Christ with the not yet. So again, Paul is not saying one thing and then taking that back and saying something else, nor is he contradicting himself or confused, but again, I think he's working with that same tension that we saw in the Gospels, with the kingdom being already here, but it has not yet arrived in

its fullness, and Paul is convinced that that's the case with our being in Christ. It's already taken place by virtue of being incorporated into Christ, yet we still live in this present evil age, and it requires the imperative.

So, if I were to summarize the big idea of Colossians, in one sentence, what I think Colossians is getting at, and I don't claim the same level of inspiration that Paul did, so I could be wrong, and there's room for improvement perhaps, but if I could summarize the message of Colossians, the way to combat false teaching is to teach the supremacy of Christ and a life of complete obedience to him. That second part is crucial. Most statements about Colossians only capture the first one, the way to combat false teaching is by emphasizing Christ's supremacy, that's true, but for Paul, it's an ethical issue as well.

It's not just a doctrinal or theological deviation, it has ethical implications. So what Paul is calling his readers on is not only to recognize the unqualified supremacy of Christ and his lordship but also to live a life of unqualified and complete obedience to Jesus Christ. And that's the way they will combat and be able to resist deviant and alternative teachings, whether in the first century or the 21st century.

Good, any questions? By the way, one other thing about Colossians is I'm not convinced either, you often hear some say that the false teachers of Colossians were teaching a wrong view of Christ, but I don't think they were teaching anything about Christ, I don't think they were Christian at all. It's just the reason Paul emphasizes Christ is not because he's combating their wrong teaching about Christ, it's simply that life in Christ is the sole answer to this theological and ethical alternative. And so, the reason he emphasizes Christ is because that's the only way they'll be able to stand against being led astray into this teaching.

I don't think it has anything to do with the teachers, I don't think it was a Christian Judaism, and I don't think they were saying anything about Christ, this is Paul's own teaching and his own emphasis. Good, no questions? So, in exam number three you won't get a single question wrong on Colossians, you'll just nail them all. All right, well let's open another piece of the early church's mail, and we'll go to the mailbox and pull out a letter to Philemon.

This is a very different letter for a number of reasons than some of the ones we've seen before. First of all, it's the first letter we've seen so far that is addressed specifically to an individual, although we'll see when you read Philemon a little more carefully, that it becomes apparent that it's addressed to an entire house church and not only to Philemon. So, the letter to Philemon gets its name from the main recipient of the letter.

The first thing is to ask, why am I treating Philemon with Colossians? A couple of reasons. Number one, most likely the book of Philemon would have been sent at the

same time as Colossians was. You'll notice that some of the same figures are mentioned in it.

Onesimus' name occurs in both Colossians and Philemon. Philemon was probably a wealthy Christian slave owner and master who lived in the city of Colossae, so Colossians and Philemon both have the same provenance or deal with the same location. Most likely the relationship is that Philemon, the book of Philemon was probably addressed to one particular church, the house church in Colossae, and then the book of Colossians was addressed to the entirety of the house churches in the city of Colossae.

Again, the early church in the first century most likely would have met in houses, and they didn't have our large churches with a cross and steeple on them and with a nice auditorium like we have. They would have met in houses, and often they would have met in the houses of wealthy individuals who may have had a house large enough to house a group of 15 to 25, 30 people, or something like that. It's possible that Philemon was, his house was the location of one of these house churches.

That's highly likely in the city of Colossae because he was probably a wealthy individual, again a slave owner, but his house as a Christian, then his house probably was the site of one of the meeting places or one of the churches in the city of Colossae. Now the main question, and one of the tricky questions in dealing with Philemon is, why was this book written in the first place? And if I had all of you sit down and read Philemon, which would be interesting to do because it doesn't take very long, as I said it's the shortest letter Paul wrote, that's why it's the last one in the collection of Paul's letters, but if you were to read Philemon, most of you could probably come up with a fairly general and accurate description of what was going on. The difficulty is filling in the gaps.

How do we reconstruct what most likely was going on that caused Paul to have to sit down and write this in the first place? And again, we talked about mirror reading, that is reading a letter and seeing reflected in the letter the situation that lies behind it, or listening to one end of the phone conversation, which becomes very prevalent when you read Philemon. And so, we have to ask, in reading Philemon, can we come up with a plausible scenario of what was going on that caused Paul to have to sit down and write this letter in the first place? There have actually been a number of options, but I want to focus on three of the most common approaches, the most common reconstructions of the situation behind Philemon, and I'm going to move from the most common to the last one is the one I think has the best chance of being the correct reconstruction, but I still admit that it's hypothetical in a way, because when you read Philemon, as I said, there are a lot of gaps that Philemon and Paul knew was going on and the church knew what was going on, but 2,000 years later, we're not privy to the situation. So, we have to read the letter and try to fill in the

gaps and come up with a construction of what we think was happening that would have been the cause of Paul writing and sending this letter.

The first thing to realize before we go on is there are three primary characters in this letter and the two main ones are Paul and Philemon. Onesimus is the third one, but he's not as important despite what some people say, Paul and Philemon are the dominant figures. This is a letter about their interaction.

It's a letter about Paul and Philemon and their relationship to each other. So those are the two main characters, Paul being the same person that we've encountered in the other letters we've looked at, starting with Romans. As I said, Philemon most likely was a wealthy Christian slave owner and master in the first-century city of Colossae, and Onesimus was one of Philemon's slaves.

Now, I have to confess, I do this every time right off the bat, I'm going to confuse Philemon and Onesimus. I do that every time. I'll try to keep that straight, but I often say Onesimus when I mean Philemon.

Then I have students raising their hands and saying, what? He did do that? Do you mean Philemon? Yes, I did. So, I apologize. I'll try to catch myself and think before I speak, which would be a novelty for me.

Philemon, Paul, and Onesimus. Again, Onesimus is the slave and is kind of the cause of the interaction between Paul and Philemon, but the primary figures, the two primary characters in this letter are clearly Paul and Philemon. This is a letter about them and their interaction and relationship.

Now, the question is, how do we reconstruct what's going on in the letter between Paul and Philemon and Onesimus? The first possible reconstruction and this is the most popular one, or it has been, and that is that Philemon, or I'm sorry there, I did it, Onesimus, Onesimus was a runaway slave. Whenever I read this, I think, has anyone ever, have you seen *The Fugitive* with Harrison Ford? That's why some think Onesimus was a fugitive. So Onesimus has done something wrong and now he's a slave on the run.

He's run away from his master, maybe he's ripped him off or stole something or done something, and now he's fled and he's a fugitive slave. But then, as the story goes, Onesimus, I did it again, Onesimus ends up in prison meeting Paul. Remember, Paul's in prison.

This is one of the four prison epistles. Paul's in prison and somehow Onesimus meets up with Paul and is converted to Christ, becomes a Christian under Paul's ministry while Paul's in prison. Now there have been all kinds of suggestions, well how would Philemon, there I did it again, how would Onesimus have gotten there? How would

Onesimus have gotten to Paul? Some think that it was purely coincidental or divine providence behind it, that some would say, well Onesimus was caught committing more crimes and he got thrown into prison and there he happened to be in the same prison as Paul was, maybe sharing a cell and they got to talking and that's how Onesimus was converted to Christianity.

That's possible, that it happened that way, but the main thing I want you to understand is, according to this view, Onesimus is a fugitive, he's a runaway slave, he's done something to wrong his master and now he's fled and run away and perhaps gone all the way to Rome. Interestingly, if Paul's in prison in Rome, then Onesimus has not messed around, he's gone all the way to Rome. That's view number one.

Another view is that Onesimus didn't really do anything wrong at all, but Onesimus has actually been sent by Philemon and the church in Colossae to minister to Paul while he is in prison, perhaps to bring him a financial gift or a care package or something, I don't know what he would have brought but the suggestion is that Onesimus has not run away, he's actually been sent by Philemon and the church to go to Paul. So everyone knows that Philemon has left and again, it's not because he's done something wrong, it's because the church has chosen him to give a gift or something to Paul while he's in prison. That's suggestion number two.

A third suggestion which I like, but again still remains a hypothesis, is what was called in Latin terms *amicus domini*, which is a friend of the master. What that was, that made, that was, under Roman law, there was provision for a slave, if a slave had some kind of a dispute or falling out with his master, the slave could go find or seek out an arbitrator to help settle the dispute under Roman law. And so is it possible, and I think highly probable, that Philemon is, Onesimus is not a fugitive, a runaway slave, but instead he and Philemon, Onesimus and Philemon have had some kind of dispute or falling out and now Onesimus, under Roman law, leaves Philemon under Philemon's knowledge and he goes to Paul, probably deliberately, maybe Philemon has told Onesimus to go to Paul, but Onesimus deliberately goes and seeks out Paul as an arbitrator in the dispute to solve whatever the problem was.

In my opinion, that's a very highly likely scenario for what is going on, so again, Onesimus is not Harrison Ford the fugitive, Onesimus has gone in full knowledge of Philemon, in full knowledge of his master, he's gone deliberately to seek out Paul as an arbitrator in whatever dispute this is. That's the third, there's a couple of other scenarios, but that's the third one and again the one that I think has a good claim to being a very highly probable hypothesis for what is going on. But then what happens again is that while he goes to seek out Paul as an arbitrator, during that time Onesimus is converted to Christianity, and what Paul will do now is write a letter basically to get Philemon to accept Onesimus back, but not as a slave, but now as a fellow brother in Christ Jesus.

Although I think personally, as I read this letter, I think Paul is asking for more than that. One of the debates about Philemon is, about what was Paul asking Philemon to do. Was he only asking Philemon to accept Onesimus back, or was Paul subtly getting Philemon to let Onesimus go to release him, mainly so he could serve alongside of Paul? So, for example, listen to this. This is part of Philemon.

For this reason, though I, Paul, am bold enough in Christ to command you to do your duty, yet I would rather appeal to you on the basis of love. So interestingly, although Paul could assert his authority as an apostle, as he did back in the first Corinthians, in this instance he says, I will not do that. Instead, I'm going to appeal not as an apostle, but as an apostle, but I will appeal to you on the basis of love.

And I, Paul, do this as an old man, and now also as a prisoner of Jesus Christ. I am appealing to you for my child Onesimus, whose father... Now, notice the familial language that Paul uses. It was very common to refer to the relationship between Christians in familial language in the first century.

So, father, son, or daughters, children, that kind of familial type language. And so Paul says, I have become his father during my imprisonment. Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful both to you and to me.

I am sending him, that is my own heart, back to you. I wanted to keep him with me so that he might be of service to me in your place during my imprisonment for the gospel. But I prefer to do nothing without your consent in order that your good deed might be voluntary and not something forced.

It seems to me that Paul is rather subtly trying to get Philemon to free Onesimus and send him back to Paul so that Paul can use him for his own service. Though again, he does so rather tactically. The book of Philemon is a study in the art of tactful persuasion.

Paul balances the fact that he's an apostle and balances the fact that he appeals to him out of love, but also subtly persuades and drives Philemon to the conclusion that he hopes Philemon will draw. And that is that he will complete this good deed of sending Onesimus back to Paul releasing him and freeing him from slavery. Now, what kind of letter is Philemon? There's something else interesting about Philemon.

We said that a very common type of literary genre or form in the first century was, much like today, a letter or an epistle, though we do it more frequently by email. But at the same time, in the same way, that we have a variety of types of letters today, hopefully, you don't write to your girlfriend or boyfriend or fiancé or spouse the same way, or your mom and dad the same way that you would write a letter applying for a job. Hopefully, you'll do those a little bit differently.

There are different conventions that we follow. The same was true in the first century. There were different types of letters and different conventions that governed the way you wrote those.

Philemon resembles very closely what is known in the first century as what we've come to know as a letter of recommendation. That is where the author will write, it's kind of a cover letter, or the author writes a letter to recommend somebody to the recipient of the letter. Presumably, Onesimus is to carry this letter back, which is a letter of recommendation on Onesimus' behalf.

But there's something else going on here, and this may be part of the tactful persuasion. The other thing you often find in a letter of recommendation is the author of the letter would often make a request for the recipient of the letter to do something, and in return, the writer would promise to return the favor. It almost set up a social obligation so that Philemon in reading this letter would have recognized his obligation to follow through with Paul's request, and then Paul would in a sense return the favor.

So, there's a social dynamic going on in Philemon as well. So again, Paul has deliberately chosen a certain type of letter to address this situation with Philemon, and again to tactfully persuade him to accept Onesimus back, now as a brother in Christ, but more than that, I think, to actually release him and free him and send him back to Paul. All right, so what's so significant about Philemon? And again, the letter is, the first thing you note about the letter is that it's the shortest and the most personal letter, at least that we have a record of, that Paul wrote.

And so that raises the question, what is the value of the letter of Philemon for us today? Or why did the church place it within the context of canonical scripture? Why did it become part of the church's canon? Why is it part of our New Testament? What value would the church have found in it? Again, let me ask you, what might be the value of this? Again, it's addressing such a specific situation and such a specific person. How can a letter about a master releasing a slave, and one that's so short, and notice, when you read Philemon, it seems to be void of all the popular and common theological concepts that we've seen in Paul's other letters, like there's no mention of salvation and justification and righteousness and the Holy Spirit and new creation, etc., etc. You don't find that kind of language in Philemon, which raises the question, what value could the church possibly have found in such a personal and such a short letter that appears to be bereft of all the theological dominant themes that we're so used to finding in Paul's letters? What might be the value of this letter for the church today? Why do you think the church found it important to include this letter in the collection of Paul's letters? Because they had space for one more, so they threw it in there? Okay.

Okay, so perhaps to give an example of, again, at least in this situation, how Paul exercised his leadership by not asserting his apostolic authority, as he did when it was necessary, but now perhaps we get a vision or a glimpse into another example of how Paul went about exercising his leadership by not asserting his authority. Okay, good. What else? What might be another, I think that's a good one.

What might be another reason why the church may have been keen to preserve this letter that's so specific and addressed to such a specific situation? What seems to be at the heart of the issue that Paul is addressing? Love and forgiveness among who? Not patron, you're close, patron-client, but what's the relationship here? Master and slave. So, Philemon, I think one of the reasons it was valued, Philemon is a book that models and emphasizes love and forgiveness in a society that is keen to draw distinctions. So, in a society that's keen to draw distinctions, such as slave and master, Philemon recognizes that the gospel of love and forgiveness transcends such barriers.

In a sense, it's a commentary on what Paul said back in Galatians, where he said, in Christ, there is no male nor female, no slave nor free, Greek nor Jew. That is the gospel and love and forgiveness transcends all social barriers in a society, especially in a society that is keen to draw such distinctions. Now, this helps us make sense of something he says upfront.

In verse 6 of Philemon, there are no chapters in Philemon, so it just goes by verse. You'll see Philemon 1 and Philemon 25. Verse 25 is the very last verse, so it's so short there are no chapters, just verse references.

But verse 6 of Philemon, Paul says, I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective when you perceive all the good that we may do for Christ. Does anyone have a translation that reads differently than that? For, I pray that the sharing of your faith, that's a phrase I want to emphasize. Does anyone have a translation that says something different than the sharing of your faith? This is the NRSV, New Revised Standard Version.

Does anyone have the NRSV or something else? This is verse 6 of Philemon. Mine said I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective. It's almost as if it sounds like he's encouraging Philemon to be more evangelistic and to share his faith.

Does anyone have a different translation? Good. I like that one better. Notice that the partnership of your faith.

I think this is what the entire book is about. The idea is not to share your faith as evangelism but to share your faith with your neighbor. The idea is a common sharing or participation.

And what that suggests then is, again, the gospel then transcends social barriers. The gospel of love and forgiveness. If Philemon shares in and participates in the gospel, so does Onesimus.

They are both equal participants in, equal shares in this gospel that transcends social distinctions. So, I think it's because of the cultural significance and what this book says about the effect of the gospel on cultural and social distinctions that was the primary means that this book would have been valued by early Christians. Again, despite its brevity, despite its specificity.

Good. There's one other question we need to ask about Philemon, and that is, why didn't Paul just come right out and condemn slavery? If Paul and Christians throughout the centuries have been so opposed to slavery, why didn't Paul just come right out and condemn it? I mean, this would have been as good a place as any for Paul to come out and say, well, it's wrong to have slaves. It's wrong to own and mistreat other human beings.

And so, a Christian should see slavery abolished, and you should immediately release your slave, Philemon, and everybody else in your church. Why doesn't he come out and immediately abolish slavery? Next week on Monday, we'll talk more about that and try to be thinking about that. Why do you think Paul approaches the issue the way he does? Why does he just come right out and speak out against it? We'll talk a little bit about that on Monday before we move on to the next document or the next letter in the New Testament.

All right. Have a good weekend.

This is Dr. Dave Mathewson in New Testament History and Literature, lecture number 23 on the book of Colossians and Philemon.