

Dr. David Mathewson, New Testament Literature,

Session 23 – Colossians, Philemon

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All right, today we're putting on our detective hats. We've got two pieces of evidence in front of us, a couple of ancient letters, and our mission is to solve two totally different mysteries, one that was threatening an entire community and another that was tearing a friendship apart. And the catch? We only have one side of the conversation.

I mean, think about it. Imagine you overhear someone on a really intense phone call. They're giving urgent advice, maybe they're even arguing a little, but you have absolutely no idea what the person on the other end is saying.

What was the problem they were talking about? What was the original question? Well, that is exactly the challenge we're facing with these letters from the Apostle Paul. You know, scholars actually have a pretty cool name for this. They call it mirror reading.

The idea is that by looking really closely at the answers Paul gives, you can start to see a faint reflection of the original problems he was addressing. It's some serious historical detective work. So let's grab our magnifying glasses and jump into our first case.

Okay, so our first case takes us to the ancient city of Colossae. There's this new philosophy, a new teaching that's spreading through the church there. And you can tell from Paul's urgent tone that he thinks this thing is seriously dangerous.

He calls it a deviant teaching. But what was it really? Well, Paul doesn't just spell it out for us in a neat little definition. Instead, he leaves a trail of clues.

First off, it seems to have some Jewish elements mixed in. Then you've got this really intense self-denial, this whole philosophy of don't touch, don't taste, don't handle. And on top of that, there's this mystical side.

We're talking visions and even the worship of angels. It's this confusing mashup that Paul says is just puffed up by human ideas. And most dangerously, it's become disconnected from the head, from the very core of their faith in Jesus.

But here's Paul's main beef with it. And this is what's so fascinating. He's not just concerned that the theology is wrong.

He's more concerned that it's, well, useless. He basically argues that for all its impressive rules and mystical hype, this teaching had no value in actually helping people with their real everyday struggles. It's like a beautiful, ornate treasure chest that promises so much.

But when you open it up, it's completely empty. It offered no real power for change. So if that whole philosophy was an empty promise, what was Paul's alternative? See, he doesn't just tear down their bad ideas.

He builds up a completely different way to think about the spiritual life. And it's got two really powerful parts. And this is where you can see the two paths laid out, side by side.

The false teaching was all about external fixes, you know, self-imposed rules, being harsh on your body, that kind of thing. Paul's solution? It's all internal. It's about your union with Christ.

They were off chasing mystical visions. Paul points them back to living a good, ethical life right here on earth. It's a huge shift from focusing on a bunch of regulations to focusing on a genuine inner transformation.

Paul's argument kicks off with this stunning declaration of fact. In grammar, they'd call this an indicative. He basically tells them, hey, that old self, the one that keeps messing you up, it's already gone.

Spiritually, because you're connected to Christ, you have died to that old way of life. That's not something to work towards. It's their new reality, period.

But then, right on the heels of that fact, he hits them with a command, an imperative. He says, because you have already died, you must therefore actively work to put to death the old stuff in your life. This creates this incredible, powerful tension.

You have to actively become what you already are. And it's that dynamic, that interplay between your new identity and your daily effort that Paul says has the real power to change you. Okay, let's switch gears.

We're going to zoom way in now. We're shifting from a big public crisis about ideas to a deeply personal crisis between two people. This story unfolds in a really short, private letter that Paul sent to a man named Philemon about his slave, a man named Onesimus.

So there are three key players in this little drama. You've got Paul writing from a prison cell somewhere. He's sending the letter to Philemon, who's a wealthy friend, a Christian who actually hosts a church in his own home.

And then at the very heart of the conflict is Onesimus, a man enslaved by Philemon who somehow has ended up with Paul. The big question is how? The letter never actually tells us what went down, which leaves us with a historical whodunit. Theory one, the most common one: Onesimus is a fugitive.

He ran away, maybe after stealing something. Theory two: he's just an innocent messenger sent by Philemon to go help Paul out. Or, and this is theory three, which I find fascinating, he was acting as a dispute arbitrator.

Turns out Roman law actually allowed an enslaved person to seek out a friend of their master to mediate a problem. So Onesimus might have gone looking for Paul on purpose to solve an issue back home. So regardless of how this whole situation started, Paul now has to fix it.

He writes to Philemon and his method, wow, it is an absolute masterclass in tact, persuasion, and friendship. And this is where Paul's strategy just gets brilliant. He could have pulled rank.

I mean, he's an apostle. He had the authority to just command Philemon to do what he wanted, but he doesn't. He very deliberately sets his authority aside and instead appeals to his friend on the basis of love, making this a request between two equals.

Paul's tactic here is so clever. He actually writes the entire letter in the format of a letter of recommendation. Now in the ancient world, this wasn't just a friendly suggestion.

Receiving a letter like this created a powerful social obligation to grant the request. It's a masterful move, putting some gentle but very firm social pressure on Philemon to do the right thing. And the appeal itself is nothing short of revolutionary.

Paul asks Philemon to welcome Onesimus back, not as a piece of property, but as a person, to see him not as a slave, but as a beloved brother. He is literally asking Philemon to let their shared faith completely overwrite the rigid social hierarchy of their entire world. So we've looked at a public argument and a very private appeal.

What's the common thread here? When you read these two letters together, what's the big idea that connects them? I think the powerful takeaway is this. For Paul, faith was never just an abstract idea stuck in your head. It was a force that had to get its hands dirty in the real world.

It had to totally reshape your spiritual reality. That's what we saw in Colossians. And it had to radically reorder your relationships and demolish social barriers, just like we saw in Philemon.

But all of this leads us to a final, really difficult question that just kind of hangs over this entire letter. If the gospel truly erases the line between slave and free, creating a new family where everyone is equal, why didn't Paul use this perfect opportunity to condemn the brutal institution of slavery itself? He challenges its very foundation, but he never calls for its abolition. And that, well, that's a question that invites us to keep digging deeper into the text and its very complex world.