

Dr. David Mathewson, New Testament Literature,

Session 23 - Colossians, Philemon

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All right. Buckle up, everybody, because we are going deep today. Two letters from the early church are on the docket: Colossians and Philemon.

You know what's really fascinating about these two letters? What's that? They were probably written from the same place. Right. At the same time.

Yeah. It's like a snapshot of what the early Christians were dealing with. I like that.

A snapshot. Well, we've got some really interesting sources you sent over for this deep dive. Yeah.

Dr. Dave Mathewson's lecture really stood out to me. Absolutely. He's a great scholar.

Yeah. Let's see what we can dig up about these letters. Sounds good.

All right. Dr. Mathewson uses this term, mirror reading, and basically the idea is that we only have one side of a conversation. It's almost like trying to figure out what someone is arguing about on the phone when you can only hear one person.

That's a great way to think about it. Right. Yeah, definitely.

That's kind of what we're dealing with in Colossians, right? There's this mystery at the heart of it. There's this teaching that Paul is worried about, but he doesn't really say what it is. Yeah, and it's not like in Galatians where it's like a five-alarm fire.

He's definitely concerned, but there are little hints throughout the text, like little clues. We see some Jewish influence, a push toward asceticism, don't touch, don't taste kind of stuff. Like self-denial? Exactly.

Like super strict self-denial. Yeah. And there's even talk of angels and visions.

Wow. It's almost like a cryptic puzzle, right? It's a good way to put it. Maybe Paul was even hesitant to really name this teaching because he didn't want to give it a platform.

Yeah. The other thing that I find interesting is that this isn't just some theological debate. Paul seems really concerned about how this is impacting people's lives.

Yeah, absolutely. He's worried it's leading them astray. Their behavior, their actions.

I don't know. It makes me think of people who get caught up in these kinds of fringe ideas, and they get so fixated on them that it actually starts to impact their relationships, their families, their work, all this. It can be really destructive, for sure.

And that's exactly what Paul is getting at: that this teaching is actually pulling people away from Christ, who Paul sees as the true source of power in resisting sin. I see. And there are a couple of verses, Colossians 2.18-19 and 2.23, where Paul really drives home this point that this teaching cuts people off from Christ.

So then how does Paul respond to that? Because I know in chapters three and four, he kind of turns the corner and starts talking about- it really shifts gears. Yeah, seeking things above. What does that mean, though? Does that mean like a mystical experience? What does that look like? And that's where Dr. Mathewson, I think, makes a really important point.

He says, don't go all mystical with this. It's not about having some out-of-body experience. It's about very practical, down-to-earth actions.

But what would those actions be? So first, it's about confronting vices, like greed, anger, dishonesty- those kinds of things that really get in the way of our relationship with God and with each other. Paul actually spells it out in Colossians 3.5-9, those are things that we need to put to death. I see.

But then he flips it and says, instead, we need to put on virtues like compassion, kindness, forgiveness. He lists those out in Colossians 3.1-14. Okay, so this is where I think things start to get really interesting. Paul introduces this idea of the old self and the new self in Colossians 3.9-10. So, help someone listening for the first time understand: what does that mean? That's a great question.

And Dr. Mathewson explains it as a shift in allegiance and where our identity comes from. So it's not about getting rid of part of ourselves. It's about recognizing that under the influence of sin and worldly values, that's our old self.

But in Christ, who we are now, that's our new self. It's who we are in a reality of righteousness and life. So it's not about self-improvement.

It's more about tapping into something that already exists. Like a new creation. Yeah.

It's like we were created, and you think about Genesis 1.27. We were created in God's image. But then sin kind of messed things up, right? Absolutely. And so now in Christ, we're being restored to that original design.

Beautifully said. That's a powerful way to think about it. And it ties back to that really beautiful hymn in Colossians 1 where Jesus is called the image of the invisible God.

Powerful imagery. And Dr. Mathewson even hints at Jesus being this new Adam. Repairing what the first Adam broke.

Right. I mean, think about the implications of that if our identity is truly rooted in Christ. It's huge.

It gives us a solid foundation to stand on when tricky teachings, temptations, all of that comes our way. It's like an anchor. It's like we're anchored to something way bigger than ourselves.

Exactly. Okay, so let's shift gears a little bit now and talk about Philemon. This is a short letter.

Very short. Almost feels like a personal note tucked into the Bible. What makes it so significant that it's in the Bible? What can we learn from it? I think that's a question a lot of people have.

And what's so cool about it is that it shows how the gospel plays out in a really messy, real-life situation. Okay. So we've got Paul, of course, writing a letter.

Then we've got Philemon, who's a wealthy Christian and a slave owner. And then we've got Onesimus, who is one of Philomen's slaves and is now with Paul. So there's some drama going on here.

What happened? Did something happen between these two? It definitely feels like there's a missing piece of the story, and there are a few theories about what happened. Okay. Lay it on me.

What are the theories? So one is that Onesimus ran away from Philemon. Okay. He's on the run, basically.

He's a fugitive. Yeah. First-century fugitive.

Yeah. And he ends up meeting Paul in prison. Oh, wow.

And he becomes a Christian. So that's one theory. What's another? Another theory is that Philomen actually sent Onesimus to minister to Paul in prison.

Oh, I see. So maybe he was bringing supplies, offering support, you know, that kind of thing. That makes sense.

A little less dramatic. Yeah. But still really interesting.

What's the third theory? Okay. So the third theory is actually the one that Dr. Matthewson seems to think is the most likely. Okay.

And this theory hinges on a Roman legal concept called *amicus domini*, which means friend of the master. *Amicus domini*. Yeah.

And it basically suggests that Onesimus and Philemon had a dispute. Okay. And Onesimus sought out Paul to act as a mediator, which, under Roman law, you could do.

You could ask someone to be an *amicus domini*. Wow. I did not know that.

So we've got a runaway slave. Yeah. We've got, like, a helper being sent.

And then we've got, like, almost like an arbitrator. Yeah. An arbitrator situation.

Whatever. Yeah. So regardless of what happened, the point is that while Onesimus is with Paul, he becomes a Christian.

Right. And now Paul's writing this letter to Philemon, asking him to take Onesimus back. But I think Paul's aiming for even more than that.

Yeah. There's something more going on here. Yeah.

Like he wants reconciliation. Right. And maybe even freedom for Onesimus.

I mean, look at Philomon 916, Paul's calling Onesimus my child. And he's kind of suggesting that Philomon should consider releasing him to work with Paul. It's subtle, but it's powerful.

Yeah, it is. It's very tactful, but there's a strong message there. And you know, it's also interesting to think about, like, Philomon is kind of structured like a letter of recommendation.

Oh, that's right. Which was like a common format in the ancient world. It was a standard genre.

Right. So Paul's kind of working within that system to try to persuade Philemon- that's a good point. To do something pretty radical.

It's like he's leveraging a social convention to push for something so much bigger. Yeah, to kind of push the boundaries. Right.

So he's working within the social norms, but he's got this deeper goal, and that's, you know, reconciliation and potentially freedom for Onesimus. And that brings us back to why this letter is in the Bible. It might seem like this personal letter, but it really shows us how the gospel can play out in these really complex social situations.

It's about love, forgiveness, and social justice, themes that are just as relevant today as they were back then. It's almost like we're getting this behind-the-scenes look at how the early church was navigating these really, really difficult questions. You know, speaking of difficult questions, there's something that's kind of been bugging me about Philomon.

Oh, yeah. If early Christians were so against slavery, why didn't Paul just come out and condemn it? Yeah, that's the question that has stumped scholars for centuries. Right.

Yeah. I mean, he clearly sees Onesimus as a brother in Christ worthy of love and respect, but he stopped short of demanding that Philemon free him. It's a real head-scratcher.

Yeah. Part of me wants to say, come on, Paul. You're the apostle.

You can lay down the law, but maybe there's more to it than that. Yeah. And I think Dr. Mathewson gives us a really helpful perspective here.

He reminds us that we need to see Paul as a pragmatist working within the realities of the Roman world. Right. I mean, remember, the early church was still very much finding its footing.

Outright rebellion against the empire could have had devastating consequences. So it's like he's planting seeds. Yeah.

He's trying to change the system from within. Instead of swinging an axe, right. Exactly.

It's a much more subtle approach. Yeah. It makes me think of those times when you're trying to challenge someone's deeply held beliefs.

Mm-hmm. And sometimes a gentle nudge goes further than a full-frontal assault, right? That's a great analogy. Yeah.

And it's really what Paul's doing here. Instead of dictating from a position of authority, he's appealing to Philemon's conscience. Right.

Urging him to do what is right, what is loving. I mean, there's this huge tension in the letter, right? Oh, absolutely. On the one hand, Paul's subtly undermining this whole master-slave dynamic by appealing for Onesimus' freedom.

Yeah. But on the other hand, he's working within that very system. Yeah.

He's trying to change it from the inside out. It's fascinating. It's so brilliant.

And I think one of the ways he does this is by emphasizing Onesimus' newfound faith. And the ways he has become useful to Paul. Right.

He's challenging that dehumanizing view of slaves that was so ingrained in Roman society. Yeah. He's saying, look, this is a valuable member of our community.

He's worthy of dignity and respect, just like any other believer. Instead of just another piece of property, he's now a brother in Christ, a partner in the gospel. Yeah.

That totally reframes the whole relationship. It does. And it goes back to that line in Philemon 6 about the partnership of faith.

Yeah. Dr. Mathewson highlights that. That partnership, that shared experience, is meant to break down the walls that society has erected between people.

So it's like our shared humanity trumps any kind of social, economic, whatever differences. It's a radical idea, especially for that time. Yeah.

And it brings us back to why Philemon is in the Bible. It's not just this private letter about a personal dispute. It's a model for social justice.

It gives us a window into how the early Christians grappled with these really complex issues. Yeah. It's about how they lived out the gospel in messy, real-life situations where there weren't easy answers.

So it's not like a blueprint for dismantling the system overnight. It's more like this model for incremental change, changing hearts and minds, chipping away at those ingrained prejudices. And ultimately, it's about paving the way for a more just society.

So we've got Colossians warning us about bad theology and calling us to live out our faith in these practical ways. Then we've got Philemon, this little letter that's got huge implications

for social justice and how we treat each other. I love how both of them wrestle with this idea of, like, how do we actually live out the gospel? Yeah.

In a world that wasn't exactly embracing it. Right. It wasn't ready for it.

That's a great point. And they challenge us to think about who we are in Christ, how we relate to each other, and what our responsibility is to actually work for justice and reconciliation. It's not like we can just sit back and say, well, that was then.

This is now. Right. These letters have something to say to us today.

Right. They're timeless. Yeah.

When you put it like that, it really does highlight how powerful these texts are. It's not just about understanding what they meant back then. Yeah.

It's about wrestling with what they mean for us, like right here, right now. Absolutely. That's where the deep dive really begins.

Yeah. And in our final segment, I think we're going to explore how the messages of Colossians and Philemon speak to us today. All right.

I'm ready. Let's dive in. All right.

So we've really dug deep into Colossians and Philemon. We have. Unpacked a lot of the historical context, the kind of hidden meanings, and even wrestled with some really tough questions.

But now for the big one: what does this all mean for us today? Right. How do these ancient letters actually help us navigate the world that we live in? That's the million-dollar question. And I think what's so cool about both of these letters is that, you know, they're not just ancient history.

Right. They're these living documents that still speak to us today. And they offer this timeless wisdom for dealing with challenges that are just as relevant now as they were back then.

Like when you think about Colossians and this warning about false teachings, it feels super relevant to me. Oh, for sure. Especially today.

You know, when we're bombarded with information constantly. And it's so easy to get swept up in persuasive arguments, especially with social media amplifying everything. Yeah.

It's like a breeding ground for bad ideas. It really is. So what would Colossians say to us in that kind of environment? Well, I think it reminds us to be discerning, to check everything against the standard of Scripture.

You know, are these ideas lifting up Christ? Right. Or are they pushing him aside? I see. And then even more practically, what kind of fruit are these teachings producing? Yeah.

Are they leading to love, joy, peace, patience? Right. Or are they pushing us away entirely? So it's not just about, like, intellectual agreement. It's about looking at the impact that these ideas have on our lives.

Yeah. And the lives of those around us. Absolutely.

It's about the lived experience. Yeah. Not just the head knowledge.

Yeah. It's almost like Colossians gives us this spiritual filter to help us sort through all the noise and figure out what's actually true and good and life-giving. That's a great way to think about it.

And then you have Philemon, which speaks so powerfully to our ongoing struggles with social justice and reconciliation. It challenges us to examine our own biases, to really see the image of God in every person, and to work for a more just world. Yeah.

It's a tall order. It is a tall order. And it's easy to kind of dismiss Philemon because slavery, it's not as overt an issue in many parts of the world.

Right. But there are structures in place that dehumanize people. Oh, absolutely.

Marginalize people, whether it's based on race or religion or economic status or anything, really. So what does Philemon have to say to us in that context? I think it reminds us that the gospel calls us to break down those walls. Yeah.

To extend love and forgiveness, even to those we consider outsiders or even enemies. So it's moving beyond just like tolerance. Yeah, it's so much more than tolerance.

To really pursue reconciliation. Yeah. And recognizing that we are part of one human family.

Absolutely. Created in God's image and redeemed by Christ. Beautifully said.

And I think it's not just about, like, these huge sweeping actions, you know, dismantling systems overnight. Right. It's about the everyday stuff.

Yeah. How we treat the people around us, how we respond to those who are different from us. It's about practicing those virtues that Paul talks about in Colossians.

Compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, patience, forgiveness. Those virtues are the building blocks. They are.

Of a just and compassionate society. Totally. It's the antidote to all the anger and the division that we see so often these days.

Yeah. And, you know, I think that's one of the most powerful takeaways from both of these letters. What's that? It's not enough to just have the right beliefs.

We have to live them out, embody them. Right. In our daily interactions.

So if we were to boil down Colossians and Philemon into some key takeaways for someone listening today, what would you say those are? OK, first, I would say ground yourself in the truth of Christ. OK. Don't get swept away by false teachings or empty promises.

Second, cultivate those virtues that reflect Christ's character. Yeah. In your everyday life.

Third, actively work for justice and reconciliation, recognizing the inherent value and dignity of every person. And finally, remember that the gospel has the power to transform individuals, communities, and ultimately the world. I love that.

You know, we started this deep dive with a bunch of, like, academic sources. Yeah. But we've ended up with something much richer.

Absolutely. A deeper understanding of ourselves, our faith, and our place in the world. Yeah.

That's the beauty of it. It's a good reminder that even these ancient texts can speak to our hearts and minds today and give us guidance and inspiration and hope. They're still relevant.

And we're not on this journey alone. You know, we have each other. We have the wisdom of the Bible.

Right. And we have the Holy Spirit to guide and empower us. That's so true.

So as we wrap up this deep dive, I want to leave you with one final thought to ponder. If Paul were writing a letter to us today, what would it say? What challenges would he address? What encouragements would he offer? What would he call us to do in our time and place? Keep wrestling with those questions. Keep diving deeper into the truth of Scripture.

And keep seeking to live out the gospel in a way that brings hope and healing to this broken world. Beautifully said. Keep seeking, keep questioning, and keep diving deeper.