

Our Forever Family
Philemon 12-16
Rev. Brian Bill
November 15-16, 2025

I remember when Beth and I took our oldest daughter to college. As the new freshmen eagerly went through their orientation, the president met with all the emotional parents in the auditorium. When he walked up to the podium, he scanned the room and said, *“I think I know what you’re thinking. You blinked and they grew up!”* I was a blubbering mess after that. Several years later, we took Emily to O’Hare because she was leaving for the Dominican Republic to serve as a missionary. I remember leaning next to one of the big columns as we watched her go through security. When we lost sight of her, I put my arms around the column and just slid to the floor in a puddle of tears.

I had similar experiences with all four daughters at different points in their lives. I remember teaching one of them how to ride her bike. One day, I was running with one hand on the back of her bike as she meandered down the road because I wasn’t ready for her to go solo yet. As I was sprinting as fast as I could, she hit the brakes, and I went flying over both her and the bike and landed in a pile on the road. I wasn’t too happy with her quick stop but when I saw her sweet smile, I just hugged her and limped home.

Being a parent is a lot like teaching a child to ride a bike because you must know when to hold on and when to let go. If you don’t release them, you’re going to get exhausted, and you may end up with some serious road rash.

I’ve also been the nervous father of the bride four times. Incidentally, I used to laugh when I watched the movie, *“The Father of the Bride,”* but I don’t find it very funny anymore. Actually, I refuse to watch it ever again.

I’ve shared this before, but I’ll never forget asking Pastor Tim for advice because I knew he officiated at the weddings of his children. My biggest concern was that I would cry like a baby walking my daughter down the aisle and then not be able to perform the ceremony. In his incredible wisdom, Pastor Tim said, *“OK. Here’s what you do. Get up real early on the day of the wedding and come to church by yourself. Walk down the aisle as if you’re next to your daughter and get all your crying out.”* I thanked him for his wise words and then I asked, *“Did that help you?”* He smiled and said, *“No. Not at all.”* Sure enough, it didn’t help me either.

In each of these situations, I felt like I was giving my very heart away...that's how Paul felt in our passage for today. Please turn to Philemon 12-16:

“I am sending him back to you, sending my very heart. I would have been glad to keep him with me, in order that he might serve me on your behalf during my imprisonment for the gospel, but I preferred to do nothing without your consent in order that your goodness might not be by compulsion but of your own accord. For this perhaps is why he was parted from you for a while, that you might have him back forever, no longer as a bondservant but more than a bondservant, as a beloved brother—especially to me, but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord.”

Paul had some strong family ties with these fellow followers of Jesus. As we've been learning in the Book of Philemon, it was difficult for Paul to know that two of his brothers in Christ, who were also his spiritual sons, were at odds with each other. He was close with both Philemon and Onesimus and decided to send Onesimus, the runaway slave, back to Philemon.

Last week we learned that *the gospel reshapes our identity and restores our usefulness*. Here's our main idea today: *Genuine love releases control, responds willingly, and rests in God's providence.*

1. Release what you love even when your heart wants to hold on. We see this in verse 12: ***“I am sending him back to you, sending my very heart.”*** The New Living Translation puts it like this: *“...and with him comes my own heart.”* It was tearing Paul's heart out to send Onesimus back to Philemon because he had grown very close to him. In verse 10, Paul calls Onesimus his ***“child”*** and in verse 16, he calls him his ***“beloved brother.”*** In verse 17, he says, ***“receive him as you would receive me.”*** Paul is urging Philemon to live out the truth of Colossians 3:11: ***“Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all.”***

It's remarkable to me that Onesimus was willing to go back to the master whom he had wronged and robbed, not knowing what kind of reception he would receive. Under Roman law the slave owner had complete and total control over his slave. When captured, a runaway slave might be crucified or branded with a red-hot iron on the forehead to let everyone know he was a fugitive. Pastor Brian Bell (no, not me) says it well: *“So he was free...but are you really free when you are constantly looking over your shoulder? Yes, Onesimus, you made things right with God, but now you need to make things right with Philemon.”*

Could anything better demonstrate the reality of his conversion? Here's a thought to ponder: *One of the surest pieces of evidence of grace in the heart is the resumption of neglected duties, a return to the things from which we have run away from.*

Paul makes a very emphatic statement in verse 13: ***“I would have been glad to keep him with me, in order that he might serve me on your behalf during my imprisonment for the gospel.”*** The word **“glad”** means *“my happy desire.”* Onesimus was known for his stellar servanthood as he met Paul's needs during his imprisonment. The phrase, **“on your behalf”** means, *“in place of, as your substitute.”* Since Philemon couldn't be there to help, Onesimus was providing for his needs in his place.

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2. Respond willingly, not because you have to. Look at verse 14: ***“But I preferred to do nothing without your consent in order that your goodness might not be by compulsion but of your own accord.”*** The word **“consent”** is a legal term and **“goodness”** refers to benevolence. Paul didn't want to twist his arm or compel him by force. The NLT renders it like this: *“I wanted you to help because you were willing, not because you were forced.”* Instead, he wanted Philemon to respond intentionally, willingly, voluntarily, and gladly.

Interestingly, according to Deuteronomy 23:15-16, Paul had the right to keep Onesimus with him: ***“You shall not give up to his master a slave who has escaped from his master to you. He shall dwell with you, in your midst...”*** Paul could have quoted this Scripture or appealed to his apostolic authority, but instead he wanted Philemon to act out of love toward his new brother. Paul chose love over law because he wanted Philemon to be free to set Onesimus free.

So, here's a question. Do you give grudgingly because you have to, or because you get to? Or are you not giving anything at all? We don't guilt people into giving or use manipulation to get anyone to part with their money because giving must come from the heart. We see this in David's prayer found in 1 Chronicles 29:17: ***“In the uprightness of my heart I have freely offered all these things, and now I have seen your people, who are present here, offering freely and joyously to you.”*** I see so much joyful generosity at Edgewood! Our giving is significantly higher than at this time last year.

My observation is that the more we give, the more joyful we become, and the more joyful we become, the more generous we become. Thanks for being such a giving church! Check out these pics of the food that went to Youth Hope's Food Pantry this week. On Thursday, one family brought in 60 meal kits! We'll continue to take donations through the end of the month.

I just heard that SecondWinders gave over 100 winter coats to One Eighty and over 50 bags of new underwear. Jenny Halupnik from One Eighty said, *"It was so much we lost count after that. Everyone is so thrilled. We appreciate helping get everyone ready for the season. Many of our residents will be part of our snow removal crews - so that gear is priceless."*

Paul gave some great teaching on giving in 2 Corinthians 9:6-7: ***"The point is this: whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver."***

Peter picks up on this idea when exhorting pastors in 1 Peter 5:2: ***"Shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you."*** Every pastor here serves willingly and joyfully as we seek to shepherd God's flock as faithfully as we are able.

Earlier this summer, I spoke to our Edge Student ministry about the return of Jesus Christ. Here's part of what I shared: *"The fact that Christ could return at any moment should motivate us to manage the resources God has entrusted to us. One translation of Luke 19:13 captures the importance of giving to kingdom work before Jesus returns: **"Put this money to work until I come back."** Are you giving of your time, your talents, and your treasures for kingdom purposes, knowing you will give an account when He returns?"*

I also encouraged them to begin giving when they are young, so it becomes a holy habit when they're older: *"After I was saved at the age of 19, I started giving a tithe (10%) because my friends in college were doing so. By God's grace and enablement, Beth and I have had the joy of increasing our giving over the years. If you're not giving, you're missing out on joy and a key part of discipleship!"*

Knowing that most teens (and even twenty-somethings) are not in the happy habit of giving, I challenged them to give something every weekend: *"If you're not giving anything, give \$1 or \$5...but do it every week. Forgo one cup of coffee each*

week and give that money to God. Take a couple offering envelopes to get started or begin giving digitally through the website or app.”

This past Sunday afternoon, nearly 60 people attended the interest meeting for our short-term mission trips in 2026. As people stood in line for lunch, I simply asked, “*What country has your name on it?*” One guy quickly responded, “*Mexico.*” A married couple answered in tandem, “*Japan.*” Others said Kenya or India. Several said they weren’t sure yet. When I asked Nick Maclin this question, he smiled and said, “*My answer is ‘Yes’ to whatever God asks me to do!*”

Can you say that? You can only say yes if you’re surrendered to His plans and purposes. Because when you’re surrendered, you’ll give what God has given you, and you’ll go wherever God directs you.

Genuine love releases control, responds willingly, and rests in God’s providence.

3. Rest in God’s providence as He works out His purposes. This is described in verse 15: “***For this perhaps is why he was parted from you for a while, that you might have him back forever.***” The phrase, “***For this perhaps is why...***” introduces the idea of God’s providence. Paul is saying something like, “*Philemon, it seems to me that God is working in unusual ways here. Let me tell you what I see, and perhaps it will make sense to you.*”

Paul is not making a definitive statement because he has some special insight into God’s plans, but he is helping Philemon see that God is working His way and His will for His glory, even though Onesimus ran away and stole from him. Paul could see a possible purpose, and he wanted Philemon to see this possibility also.

According to Isaiah 55:8-9, we don’t always know what God is doing, or why He’s doing it, but we do know He is always doing His work, and we can trust Him: “***For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.***”

I like how Paul chose to use a euphemism to soften what Onesimus did: “***...he was parted from you for a while...***” John Chrysostom said it like this: “*And he has not said, ‘therefore he fled’ but ‘therefore he was separated,’ in order to elicit some tenderness on the part of Philemon.*” He could have called him a runaway fugitive who ripped him off.

He also emphasized that considering all that happened, he was separated from him only for ***“a while,”*** which literally means, *“a short hour.”* As bad as it was, it didn’t last forever, and the benefits are huge because Philemon now has him ***“back forever”*** as a brother in God’s forever family! He has him in the *here and now* and he will be in relationship with him in the *hereafter*. His temporary loss will become everlasting gain.

God loves to take bad things and turn them into good things. We see this in Genesis 45:5 when Joseph said to his brothers: ***“And now do not be distressed or angry with yourselves because you sold me here, for God sent me before you to preserve life.”*** This is fleshed out more in Genesis 50:20: ***“As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today.”***

The easiest way to remember what God’s providence means is to focus on the root of the word, which is to “provide.” Providence is the preserving and governing of all things under the intentional sovereign rule of God. This definition is helpful: *“Divine providence is the governance of God by which He, with wisdom and love, cares for and directs all things in the universe.”*

How many of you saw the effusive display of God’s glory known as the Northern Lights this week? Because I had a meeting Tuesday night and didn’t look up in the sky after it was over, I totally missed it.

I’m thankful for all those who posted breathtaking and awe-inspiring images on Facebook and wished I would have just looked up. Here’s a picture Pastor Chad posted from Westlake. Here’s one Emery Parks took near Knoxville Road. These pictures make me think of Psalms 19:1: ***“The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims His handiwork.”***

I’m told that these rippling waves of green, purple, and pink almost seemed alive. What’s even more amazing is that this cosmic light show was caused by invisible particles from the sun colliding with the atmosphere of earth. What’s normally unseen became something stunningly seen.

I appreciated this insight: *“In the same way, God’s invisible power and presence break through into our world in radiant ways. When we see beauty in creation, grace in forgiveness, or peace in chaos, it’s like a glimpse of divine light shimmering through the darkness. The Northern Lights remind us that even in the coldest, darkest nights, God is still painting the sky with His glory.”*

God is always at work...and sometimes we get to see it. If we'll just look up.

BTW, Beth and I drove out in the country to look for this cosmic light show on Wednesday night, but we missed it again! Later, I came across this thought which puts it all in perspective: *“If you think looking at the Northern Lights is cool, just wait until you see the Light of the World coming in the clouds with power and great glory! The beauty of the aurora paints the sky for a moment, but the glory of Christ, the Alpha and Omega, will light up the heavens forever. The heavens won't just shimmer...they'll split open as the King of kings returns, radiant in splendor beyond anything we can imagine.”*

Just because God is often silent, that doesn't mean He is absent. In John 5:17, Jesus told us He and His Father are always at work: **“My Father is working until now, and I am working.”** The challenge is holding on to this truth, even when circumstances seem bleak.

Will you trust His providence to provide even when you don't see Him working? Trust in the providence of God when you can't feel the presence of God.

Look now at verse 16: **“No longer as a bondservant but more than a bondservant, as a beloved brother—especially to me, but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord.”** Paul is suggesting a new arrangement in which Philemon would become Onesimus' patron, and he would open his home to a long-lost brother. Instead of being treated as a slave, Onesimus would be considered a flesh and blood family member now that he is a blood-bought brother. With these words, Paul is undermining the “master-slave” relationship by laying the foundation for the eventual legal abolition of slavery. One pastor writes: *“If a man is a stranger, I might make him my slave. But how can my brother be my slave?”*

While Christians in the past did not always condemn slavery as a horrible sin, historically it is true that as Christianity has grown, slavery has withered not by way of revolution, but by reformation because the transformation of the individual is the key to the transformation of society. Charles Spurgeon said it like this: *“But mark this word, the true reforming of the drunkard lies in giving him a new heart; the true reclaiming of the harlot is to be found in a renewed nature...the gospel has always struck at the very root of slavery.”* Walter Kaiser writes: *“We read in the literature of the second century and later of many masters who upon their conversion freed their slaves...a changed heart produced changed behavior and...in the end brought about social change.”*

It must be said clearly and without hesitation: all forms of racism are sinful and completely repugnant to God. The Bible tells us that every person from every culture, color and background, is made in the image of God. That means there's no room in the heart of a Christ-follower for racism, prejudice, or superiority of any kind. Racism is not just a social issue; it's a spiritual one, because it denies the truth of who God is and what He's created.

But we also need to recognize that racism isn't the only way people are devalued today. It is estimated that nearly 28 million people around the world are subjected to forced labor. When you include other forms of modern slavery, such as human trafficking and forced marriage, the total rises to nearly 50 million men, women and children. These image-bearers of God are treated as property instead of as people who matter to God. That ought to break our hearts because it breaks the heart of God. As followers of Jesus, we're not called to turn away from injustice but to confront it with truth, love, and action. The gospel compels us to see every person as someone Christ died for, and to stand for their dignity and freedom by responding with compassion, advocacy, and action.

Let's summarize.

- 1. Release what you love even when your heart wants to hold on.**
- 2. Respond willingly, not because you have to.**
- 3. Rest in God's providence as He works out His purposes.**

Action Steps

- 1. Join God's forever family through the new birth.** John 1:12 says, "***But to all who did receive him, who believed in His name, He gave the right to become children of God.***"
- 2. Get connected with the family of God.** It's time for some of you to join Edgewood and get connected in a Growth Group. Pastor Dan loves to use the phrase, "Forever Family." This week, I asked him what he means when he uses this phrase: "*For me, it's a reminder of the unity we have in the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit brings us together no matter our background, likes or dislikes. As a family in Christ, we have people who love and care for us beyond any biological family. People who God sovereignly placed in our lives to encourage and support us. Plus, we'll spend eternity with our*

forever family. We hope and pray our biological family is with us too, but our Edgewood family will be together forever.”

3. **Stop running and return if you’ve been in a faraway place.** No matter how many steps you’ve taken away from God, it’s only one step back! Once you turn back, you’re back! William Barclay writes: *“Christianity is not trying to help people escape from their past and run away from it; it is aiming to enable them to face the past and rise above it.”*
4. **Make amends with someone you’ve wronged.** In Celebrate Recovery, making amends is addressed in Step 8: *“We made a list of all persons we had harmed and became willing to make amends to them all”* and Step 9: *“We made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.”*
5. **Forgive someone who has wronged you.** Is there someone you’ve been holding hostage? It’s time to release them from the debt of ever having to pay you back.
6. **Be totally surrendered to Christ.**

Interview with Edge Students (Cora Bennett, Lucas Wuestenberg, Grace Tucker, Caleb Cox, and Payton Doran)

1. How has God been using the Edge Student Ministry to help you grow?
2. The theme of next weekend’s retreat is, “Total Surrender.” What does this mean to you personally?
3. What fears or doubts make total surrender difficult for teens your age?
4. What are you hoping will happen as students surrender everything to Christ?
5. How can we pray for those going on the retreat? Can you explain the wristbands?

Closing Song: Surrender