

**The Great Exchange**  
Philemon 17-25  
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November 22-23, 2025

According to several sources, a handwritten copy of the letter to Philemon was once placed on President Abraham Lincoln's desk. After reading it, Lincoln was reported to have said, "*That's the gospel!*" A few months later he issued the Emancipation Proclamation.

While it's difficult to know if this actually happened, Lincoln knew the Bible extremely well and could quote long passages from memory. We do know he had a deep, personal connection to the book of Philemon and is known to have quoted or alluded to it when arguing against slavery.

Lincoln's phrase "*a new birth of freedom*" was not merely political rhetoric; it reflected a deeper moral and theological vision. Many scholars noted that Lincoln, who was steeped in biblical language, reflected the logic of Philemon, where Paul appealed for a transformation of social realities from the inside out. It could be said that *Christianity redefined human relationships so radically that slavery eventually became unsustainable.*

Lincoln would often read or paraphrase Philemon 16: "***No longer as a slave but as a dear brother***" to argue that Christianity provided a revolutionary redefinition of human identity and worth, grounded in the reconciling work of Christ, ultimately pointing toward abolition.

This weekend, we're finishing up our four-part series we've called, "The Gospel Changes Everything." Let's read verses 17-25 together: "***So if you consider me your partner, receive him as you would receive me. If he has wronged you at all, or owes you anything, charge that to my account. I, Paul, write this with my own hand: I will repay it—to say nothing of your owing me even your own self. Yes, brother, I want some benefit from you in the Lord. Refresh my heart in Christ. Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say. At the same time, prepare a guest room for me, for I am hoping that through your prayers I will be graciously given to you. Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends greetings to you, and so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke, my fellow workers. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.***"

This passage teaches this truth: *At its core, the gospel is all about having our debt of sin paid for by Jesus, who exchanged His righteousness for our rottenness.*

After gently and tactfully appealing to Philemon to do the right thing in the first 16 verses, Paul gives five gospel-shaped imperatives to show what real reconciliation looks like.

**1. Receive.** We see this in verse 17: ***“So if you consider me your partner, receive him as you would receive me.”*** The word **“if”** can be translated as *“since.”* The word **“partner”** was used to describe Peter, James, and John’s partnership as fisherman (Luke 5:10). It comes from the same word as *“fellowship”* and means, *“fellow partaker who shares everything in common with Christ.”* Since we are fellow partakers of grace and fellow partners in the gospel, we’re called to live in community with one another.

The idea behind **“receive”** is *“to take to oneself, to grant access to one’s heart and home, to welcome into one’s family circle.”* We’re all exhorted to do this in Romans 15:7: ***“Welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.”*** Paul is urging Philemon to welcome Onesimus, his runaway slave, as eagerly and tenderly as he would welcome Paul. For reconciliation to take place, rejection must end.

Let’s ponder this. Philemon is being asked to welcome his runaway slave who has caused him embarrassment, financial loss, and potential legal trouble, with the same open arms he would stretch out to the apostle Paul.

This is exactly what God does for us when we repent and return to Him. We were runaways and when we turned back, the Father didn’t stand at the door with a ledger of our wrongdoings. He ran to us and embraced us, He killed the fattened calf, and He welcomed us into His forever family.

Since Christ has received us like that, how can we not welcome one another, especially the brother or sister who has wronged us, failed us, or cost us something?

**2. Release.** If verse 17 speaks of the doctrine of identification, verse 18 describes the doctrine of imputation: ***“If he has wronged you at all, or owes you anything, charge that to my account.”*** The word **“wronged”** refers to being *“damaged, hurt, or unjustly treated”* while **“owes”** means to be indebted financially. In an amazing act of grace, Paul offered to pay whatever Onesimus owed Philemon. The

word “**charge**” is an accounting term which means, “*to reckon.*” Paul was saying, “*Whatever Onesimus stole, you can charge it to my account.*” A more contemporary phrase would be, “*put it on my tab*” or “*I’ll ‘Venmo you’ whatever he owes you.*”

The statements “**receive him**” and “**charge that to my account**” remind us of what Jesus did for us. We are accepted “in the Beloved,” and our debt is charged to His account as Isaiah 53:6 says: “***And the Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all.***” Psalm 32:2 says, “***Blessed is the man to whom the Lord does not impute iniquity.***”

But there is even more...Jesus not only takes our rottenness; He credits to us His righteousness as we see in Romans 4:5: “***And to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness.***” I don’t know who first said it, but I’ve found this phrase to be a helpful summary of the doctrine of imputation: “*We owed a debt we could not pay; He paid a debt He did not owe.*”

In verse 19, Paul strengthened his appeal for Philemon to release Onesimus: “***I, Paul, write this with my own hand: I will repay it – to say nothing of your owing me even your own self.***” Paul didn’t use an autopen or rely on someone to transcribe his message. Most of Paul’s letters were written through an amanuensis (a secretary who took dictation). But with this brief letter, Paul took the stylus himself and wrote these words personally.

In the Greco-Roman world, when someone wrote out a financial obligation *in their own handwriting*, it functioned as a legally binding promissory note, much like signing an IOU today. Paul voluntarily put himself on the hook for any debt Onesimus might owe Philemon. Paul is saying something like this: “*If I’m willing to pay off Onesimus’s debts, like Jesus paid our sin debt, how much more should you forgive your new brother in Christ?*”

When speaking of settling accounts, Paul gently reminded Philemon that he was also indebted to Paul because he led him to Jesus. There was a sense in which Philemon owed Paul his very salvation. He’s saying something like this, “*I know Onesimus owes you a debt. But may I remind you that you owe me an even greater debt than he owes you?*” Onesimus owed a material debt; Philemon owed Paul a spiritual debt. Paul employed a similar argument in 1 Corinthians 4:15: “***For though you have countless guides in Christ, you do not have many fathers. For I became your father in Christ Jesus through the gospel.***”

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**3. Refresh.** In verse 20, Paul describes the refreshment that comes from reconciliation: ***“Yes, brother, I want some benefit from you in the Lord. Refresh my heart in Christ.”*** The word “yes” serves as a positive intensifier and speaks of certainty. Notice he uses the term “**brother**,” which means, “*from the same womb*,” to remind Philemon they are members of the same family. The phrase, ***“I want some benefit from you”*** is very emphatic and speaks of profit or joy. Paul is using a wordplay here as the word “**benefit**” is closely related to the name Onesimus in Greek, so it reads something like this: *“Let me find in you, as I have found in him, a true Onesimus.”*

In the last phrase of verse 20, Paul exhorted Philemon: ***“Refresh my heart in Christ.”*** In verse 7, Philemon refreshed the hearts of fellow believers and now he’s urged to refresh Paul’s heart. This is similar to what Paul wrote in Philippians 2:2: ***“Complete my joy by being of the same mind...”***

In verse 21, Paul shows how highly he thinks of Philemon: ***“Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say.”*** One paraphrase renders it like this: *“I know you well enough...you’ll probably go far beyond what I’ve written.”* It’s important for people to know how highly we think of them. Paul expressed this on a regular basis as we see in 2 Corinthians 2:3: ***“...for I felt sure of all of you, that my joy would be the joy of you all.”*** Paul not only believed Philemon would do the right thing; he believed he would go over and above. I think of Matthew 5:41: ***“And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles.”***

Parents, it’s important to express confidence in our children by making statements like, *“I know you’ll make a good decision and do the right thing and even go beyond that.”* I love watching how families live on mission at Edgewood. I think of Craig and Stephanie Mowers, who are making young disciples in their home by giving them opportunities to serve. On Tuesday of this week, they helped load Operation Christmas Child boxes into bigger boxes and then into a trailer (other families served in this way as well). Under the leadership of Jodie Russell, Edgewood is a regional drop-off location for boxes. I also love how all generations serve together, as Leslie Huggins and Alice Dailing were also hard at work. As of Tuesday, 475 of the 815 boxes in the trailer were from Edgewood! Jodie commented, *“Prayer is done over the boxes with drop-offs, and you can just feel the Holy Spirit!”*

**4. Respond.** To provide some urgency and accountability, Paul tells Philemon in verse 22 that he hopes to come and stay with him when he is released: ***“At the same time, prepare a guest room for me, for I am hoping that through your prayers I will be graciously given to you.”*** I love how Paul invited himself over to Philemon’s Bed and Breakfast! While Paul was in prison, he was confident in the power of prayer, believing as Philemon prayed, he would be released. To Paul, prayer was powerful, not perfunctory. It was common for Paul to write to different people to let them know he was planning to visit them. We see this in Philippians 2:24: ***“And I trust in the Lord that shortly I myself will also come.”***

**5. Remember.** In verse 23, Paul reminded Philemon that conflict and disagreement doesn’t just affect two people, it impacts the family of God: ***“Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends greetings to you, and so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke, my fellow workers.”*** Each of these five names are also mentioned in the conclusion to the letter to the Colossians, confirming that Philemon lived in Colossae.

These five guys (no, not the hamburger chain) are his fellow workers. Paul told Philemon he’s surrounded by a living ‘band of brothers’ who were also urging him to do the right thing. It’s like Paul was saying, *“Hey Philemon, your accountability group is with you and for you. We’re all rooting for you to welcome Onesimus back as a brother, not a slave.”*

There’s power when we work together, *because no one can do everything, but everyone can do something.* God saves us individually, one at a time. But He also saved us for community and enfolded us into the church, as members of God’s forever family.

Recently, we saw this on display when Edgewood members were invited to fill out a survey. This past Monday night, we gathered together to share the results and to begin the process of fleshing out some of the ideas that were shared. Copies of the survey highlights are available at the Welcome Center. We’ve already implemented two of the suggestions:

- The first suggestion was for us to help the hurting in our community. We’ve already collected a lot of non-perishable food items that have been distributed. In addition, we just heard that many students at Rock Island Academy don’t have pillows or blankets (and some don’t even have beds). One of the teachers is collecting 500 pillows and blankets and we’ve been

asked to participate. So far, our Growth Groups, Youth Group, Mainspring, a Homeschool Group, and the church staff have jumped in to help. If you'd like to participate, the collection boxes are in the Student Center.

- The other suggestion was to make the Family Room more family friendly. Pastor Daniel, Marcy, and Sheila have already made some significant changes, with more to come.

Let's consider these five guys and as we do, let's think through what we can learn from each one of them.

- **Epaphras the Praying Powerhouse.** In Colossians 1:7, Epaphras was called a *“beloved fellow servant”* and *“a faithful minister of Christ.”* Epaphras was the unsung intercessor of the New Testament. While others preached and traveled, he wrestled in prayer. Colossians 4:12 says this about him: *“Epaphras, who is one of you, a servant of Christ Jesus, greets you, always struggling on your behalf in his prayers, that you may stand mature and fully assured in all the will of God.”* The Greek word for *“struggling”* means, *“agonizing, wrestling, striving, and fighting like an athlete in the arena.”*

Epaphras was the guy on his knees in a Roman jail cell, soaked in sweat from the struggles of spiritual warfare, as he brought fellow Christians and churches before the throne of God. He prayed with passion, persistence, and purpose. Epaphras was proof that the mightiest work in the kingdom often happens far from the stage, in hidden places, with calloused knees and earnest intercession.

- **Mark the Comeback Kid.** Mark is the classic comeback story in the New Testament. As one of Jesus' disciples, he fled in fear, leaving his clothes behind, when Christ was arrested (Mark 15:51–52). Later, he folded under pressure during Paul's first missionary journey and scurried back home (Acts 13:13). Paul didn't want to give him another chance and refused to take him on the second missionary journey (Acts 15:36-40), but Barnabas stood up for him and restored him to ministry.

Years later, when Paul was in a Roman prison writing Colossians and Philemon, Mark was with him. Paul saw value in him and encouraged the believers to *“welcome him”* (Colossians 4:10). And right before Paul's execution, he said these redemptive words about Mark in 2 Timothy 4:11:

***“Get Mark and bring him with you, for he is very useful to me for ministry.”***

Because of the grace of God, Mark’s failure didn’t define him. Like Onesimus, he went from being useless to useful. And this “Comeback Kid” went on to write the Gospel of Mark, leaving a legacy that has strengthened the church for 2,000 years.

- **Aristarchus the Steadfast Supporter.** Aristarchus is the picture of loyal, long-haul discipleship. Born in Thessalonica, he supported Paul through the riot in Ephesus (Acts 19:29) and sailed with Paul into life-threatening storms and survived a shipwreck (Acts 27:2). According to Colossians 4:10, he was a ***“fellow prisoner”*** with Paul in Rome.

Aristarchus was rather ordinary, but he was steadfast. So many of us want to do the fantastic, amazing, and spectacular, while God wants us to focus on being humble, faithful, obedient, and available.

You don’t have to be a perfect parent or a super saint because there aren’t any (just ask Adam and Eve). God is looking for ordinary moms and dads, grandpas and grandmas, singles and widows, teens and seniors, in ordinary circumstances who are faithful in rather ordinary ways. In a world that screams, *“Go viral and be extraordinary,”* God whispers, *“Just be faithful right where you are today, with what I’ve given you.”*

One pastor takes a lot of pressure off when he declares, *“God is awesome. He doesn’t need you to be awesome. He wants you to be obedient.”*

Instead of looking for instantaneous growth, the cumulative effect of daily, ordinary faithfulness will produce gradual, but real growth. Rather than trying to achieve YOUR incredible destiny by living out YOUR amazing dreams, live for the awesome Savior by dying to self and sin while taking up your cross and following Him in hard places.

In a society obsessed with the immediate and instantaneous, one writer challenges us to, *“Strive for a long obedience in the same direction.”*

- **Demas the Deconstructing Drifter.** In contrast to the faithful disciple named Aristarchus, Demas deserted his faith. From all outward appearances, he was devoted at the beginning, but he eventually bailed on

Paul because of the allure of the world as we read in 2 Timothy 4:10: ***“For Demas, in love with this present world, has deserted me.”*** Somewhere along the line, his heart drifted, and he began loving the world more than the Word. 1 John 2:15: ***“Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him.”***

Brothers and sisters, we live in a time when so-called Christians are deconstructing, deserting, de-churching, and denying the Lord Jesus Christ. This should trouble us, but we should not be surprised, because Paul warned about this in 1 Timothy 4:1: ***“Now the Spirit expressly says that in later times some will depart from the faith by devoting themselves to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons.”*** 2 Timothy 4:3-4 adds: ***“For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths.”***

Perhaps you think you’ll never fall away from the faith, but I’ve seen it happen many times over the years. Disappointment can lead to desertion. Dating or marrying a non-Christian can cause you to leave your first love. The death of someone close can lead to so much bitterness that some choose to no longer believe. Playing around with sin can lead to being in bondage to sin and out of control addiction can cause people to lose hope. Suffering or persecution can propel others to bail on their faith. Prosperity can do the same. Sports or other Sunday activities can cause people to abandon the Almighty and cave on their commitment to gather with God’s people.

Demas reminds us that it’s entirely possible to begin well and yet finish poorly. The world’s pull is powerful, compromise is subtle, and faith can quietly cool if it’s not cultivated. Loving the world will ultimately lead to lukewarm faith, which makes Jesus nauseated. The downfall of Demas is a warning light on the dashboard of discipleship, urging us to guard our hearts so we finish the race with faithfulness.

- **Luke the Faithful Physician.** In 2 Timothy 4:14, Luke is described as the ***“beloved physician.”*** I came across this helpful paragraph which describes him *“as a man of compassion, intellect, and remarkable faithfulness. He joined Paul on his missionary journeys, often using the word ‘we’ in Acts to show he traveled right alongside him. When others left Paul, Luke remained (2 Timothy 4:11). He cared for Paul physically, supported him spiritually,*

*and recorded the spread of the gospel with historical precision. Luke gave the church the Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles, which together comprise over a quarter of the New Testament. His blend of medical skill, pastoral heart, and scholarly accuracy reminds us that God uses every gift for His glory.”*

These five guys were standing with Paul on behalf of Onesimus. Their “vote” in favor of Onesimus would have carried significant weight.

In verse 25, Paul ends this letter like he does in other letters by acknowledging the importance of grace: ***“The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.”***

Grace is also at the beginning of the letter in verse 3: ***“Grace to you and peace...”*** Because of God’s grace, we can be at peace with God and with others. We need grace for salvation and for sanctification. As grace flooded Philemon’s spirit, he would be able to give grace to Onesimus and welcome him as a brother.

In addition, the letter to Philemon begins and ends with a focus on Jesus. In verse 1 we read, ***“Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus...”*** And in verse 3 and verse 25, he uses the Savior’s full majestic title: ***“the Lord Jesus Christ...”***

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While the Book of Philemon ends leaving us uncertain what Philemon would do, tradition tells us that Onesimus was restored and received as a brother because he went on to become the pastor of the church in Ephesus. Jerome, one of the early church fathers, wrote, *“Onesimus became an ardent preacher of the gospel.”* Historians believe he died a martyr’s death under Trajan the emperor. He went from feeling useless to becoming faithfully useful. He went from sinner to saint, from fugitive to forgiven, all because the gospel changes everything.

In Onesimus’ case, Paul offered to pay off his debt. In our case, as sinners before a holy God, Jesus Christ paid our sin debt in full! We have nothing to offer because even our righteousness is as filthy rags (Isaiah 64:6). Romans 6:23 gives both the bad news and the good news, ***“For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.”***

A couple months ago, a young man named Alex started attending on Saturday nights and hasn’t missed a service since. After processing some unsettling things

that took place in our culture, he started seeing a number of videos people were posting about Jesus. He sent me a message and gave me permission to share his story.

*I would just skip the videos, block the people who posted them, or wish there was a way where I could press a button and see no videos about God anymore, but then I was interested. I kept watching more and more videos and got more interested in learning about God. I got so interested in fact, that I decided when I got to work on a Friday, that I would pick up a Bible and read it for the first time in my life. I read 10 or 15 pages from Genesis at first...I read the Bible on Sunday, but I had a random panic attack out of nowhere. I know now that I felt God watching me and I wasn't used to that at all. I kept looking behind my back and I even didn't like looking in the mirror. I got home from work on Sunday morning, and I accepted Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior. It was difficult to say it, but the moment I did, a great peace came upon me. It was the best decision that I have ever made.*

We began the service today by celebrating the power of the gospel to change lives as demonstrated in baptism. Here's a testimony of one more life change that happened just a few days ago out in the Fireside Room: *"Today 11/18 I became a born-again Christian. I got to meet with my new pastor, and we talked about how important it is for me to find my way in this world. I have been longing for Christ to be part of the rest of my life. I am grateful God still loves me and that I still have a chance to make a difference..."*

## **Invitation**

Are you ready to exchange your rottenness for the righteousness of the Lord Jesus Christ? If so, admit that you're a sinner and repent from your sins. Turn to Christ and trust His finished work on the cross, where He died as your substitute.

Colossians 2:14 says, ***"By canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This He set aside, nailing it to the cross."*** He rose again on the third day, showing His power over death, the devil, and your own depravity. Receive Him as your Lord and Savior right now and give Him full control of your life as you live under His Lordship for the rest of your life.

*The gospel changes everything  
The turning point in history  
Even now it's changing me  
From who I was*

*You made a way  
So I could come  
Just as I am  
To You my God*

**Closing Song:** The Gospel Changes Everything

**New Member:** Leslie Huggins (10:45)