

The Heart of a Christ-Follower Towards Community

Philemon: Part 1

Pastor Adam McMurray

For the next two weeks we are going to spend time in an often overlooked New Testament book, Paul's letter to Philemon. Picking up the book of Philemon is a lot like starting to watch the TV series "Lost" in the middle of season 3. It becomes very clear that a lot of drama has transpired that we're not privy to. The backdrop of Philemon is like a 1st century soap opera, replete with relational drama, scandal, imprisonment and slavery. It is a glimpse into the lives and the relationships of the early church and it is an unexpected window into Paul's understanding of the heart of a Christ-follower in the context of Christian community.

The book of Philemon tells the story of a slave named Onesimus who, having wronged his master Philemon, sought out the council of Paul and in the process came into a saving relationship with Christ. The occasion of the letter is the return of Onesimus to Philemon who was a Christian living at Colosse and a leading member of the church which met in his home. Onesimus brings with him the letter that he hopes will secure his safe return to his offended master. Paul has written the letter out of respect for Philemon and out of a deep brotherly love for Onesimus. This very private affair puts on display the themes of authentic Christian relationships and the nature of the heart of a Christ-follower.

Relationships—A Matter of the Heart

"I am sending him—who is my very heart—back to you". (Philemon 12) Philemon is all about relationships, and true Christian relationships are always a matter of the heart. We see this in the way that Paul speaks of his friend Onesimus. He calls him "his very heart". It is the Greek word *splanchna*, and it occurs three times in Philemon alone and refers to the deepest affections of a person—the seat of emotion—the innermost parts. It is surprising enough to hear Paul speaking this way of a runaway slave, but what we find is that this kind of deep, heart-level love for another was not only the norm in Paul's relationships, it was his expectation. For Paul, it is at the heart-level that we experience Christ in our relationships with one another. It is through our new hearts that we live out true Christian love for each other. So how did Paul view the heart of a Christian?

The New Covenant Heart

"I appeal to you on the basis of love." (vs 9) The book of Philemon teaches us that Paul had a very high regard for the heart of a person who has been saved by Jesus Christ. Rather than demanding that Philemon do the right thing in welcoming back Onesimus, Paul believed that his Christian friend would do it because he had been transformed by Christ. Paul knew Philemon to be a man who had great "faith in the Lord Jesus" and "love for all the saints" (vs 5) so he trusted that Philemon would receive his runaway slave "no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother". It is the power of Christ to change our hearts and it is the great promise to those who have been born of God. Ezekiel 36:26 says, "I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh". This is the promise of the New Covenant. We have been given a new heart, and with that new heart a change in our deepest values and our basic disposition towards God and others. If you have put your hope in the saving work of Jesus Christ on the cross, you are a new creation. You have a new heart. And the bible tells us that this new heart is actually inclined towards God and longs to do good. This is amazing and we need to grow in our understanding of what God has done in our hearts so that we can live it out fully. I

pray that our study through Philemon will refresh your heart. I pray that we will begin to see how the reality of Jesus Christ in our hearts can transform our relationships. I pray that we will truly love God with all of our hearts and love one another the same. Not because we have to, but because we deeply want to.

Opportunities for Prayer @ River West Church

Saturday, April 26th-Saturday May 3rd, El Salvador Mission Trip

Your support through prayer is appreciated as we send off 20 River West Volunteers on our 9th trip to Nuevo Renacer village through our partnership with Agros.

Wednesday, April 30th Global Missions Prayer Group RWCC @ 7pm

This is the perfect opportunity to find out how God is reaching out to other parts of the world through River West. Join Pastor Chris and others on the last Wednesday of each month. Contact Pastor Chris at 699-2226 or chris@riverwest.org

Wednesday, May 7th Parent Prayer Group RW @ 7-8pm

Come and join other parents of Jr. High or High School students to pray for our students and the Student Ministries leaders. For more information contact Cynthia Weston @ 515-1464 or cwweston@juno.com

Saturday, May 17th Saturday Morning Prayer RW @ 8-9am

If you would like to take a more active role in the heart of our church through prayer, come join us during this amazing time of seeking and rejoicing in Gods plans for us as a church and community of believers. For more information contact Jeff Nopper @ 245.1841 or Ryan Lee @ 235.9388