

What if It Works?

Domino Effect Series Week 4: 4/22/18

Philemon

Welcome/intro/vision

Last week of a series we've had a ton of fun with, called The Domino Effect, if you're new, we're talking about how the first Easter Sunday unleashed an unprecedented amount of good into the world

If you Google "non-profit organizations" what you find: Jesus 's influence is EVERYWHERE: Red Cross, Habitat for Humanity, YMCA, St. Jude's, and on and on and on and on

You've got literally THOUSANDS upon thousands of non-profits and service organizations totaling BILLIONS of dollars and BILLIONS of men and women work hours quietly making a difference

Trying to tackle some of the most difficult and stubborn problems in some of the harshest and most difficult environments on the globe

From Easter Sunday to today, April 22, 2018,

NO SINGLE EVENT IN HISTORY has had such a sustained impact for good than Jesus's actual physical resurrection from the dead

One piece of why we believe the resurrection of Jesus actually happened is because it has unleashed 2,000 years of unprecedented generosity into the world

And we've been inviting everyone to jump in on the Domino Effect and tell us about where you're participating

Since Easter, we've had dozens of you post pictures on social media with you and a domino and a non-profit organization that you're involved with that's making a difference somehow somewhere

Almost 30 different organizations were nominated in the past 3 weeks from our little church

And we promised when we started this series back on Easter Sunday that today we'd award a \$1,000 grant to an organization nominated by one of you here at Woods Charter

AND we'd award ANOTHER \$1,000 to an organization nominated by someone at our Pittsboro campus location

But something really cool happened about half-way through this series.

About two weeks ago we had someone from our church email me and asked if they could give \$2,000 so that we could give away TWO awards at each location

So thanks to this anonymous donor, we're going to give away TWO \$1,000 grants to TWO organizations nominated by two of you here RIGHT HERE, RIGHT NOW

Without further ado, call up our award winners: YOUNG LIFE and BYNUM FRONT PORCH

1. Introduce both CCC person who nominated and the person from the organization who's in charge: Tracy's YL; Tunnells and Martha Collins from BFP
2. Ask the person who's in charge to tell us a little bit about their organization and how this money might help make a difference
3. Ask the person who nominated them what they love about the organization

Pray a blessing over them

As we close this series today, we're going to look at one of the most obscure corners of the New Testament

Today, we're going to see how the apostle Paul makes an appeal to a friend to take an action that's going to require him giving up what he has a RIGHT to do by the Roman law of the time and instead to lay down those rights in order to walk in the Jesus way

And as Paul makes this appeal, he's going to be laying the foundation and the groundwork that will be the undoing of what is arguably the greatest human evil ever invented: slavery

What we're going to read is going to require some context, so here's the back story.

The apostle Paul is writing this letter, we met him last week as he had a dramatic encounter with Jesus that changed his life and the course of history forever

And as we pick up Paul's story at this point later in his life is spending all of his time traveling from city to city all around the Mediterranean starting and building up communities of Christ followers

The only time he's NOT doing that is when he's been arrested for doing it! And while he's in different jail cells, he writes all kinds of letters to these fledgling little churches that he's started
And that's how we get much of our New Testament

We're going to read one of those letters today, it's a letter to a man named Philemon and the unusual circumstances that propel the writing of this letter is that Philemon owned a slave named Onesimus who ran away

Slavery in the ancient Greco-Roman world wasn't as harsh in most instances as it was in the American south, but it was still slavery and slaves ran away regularly

And they'd often run to cities to disappear into the masses because if they got re-caught it was a punishable offense, could be trouble for them

So Onesimus ran away from Philemon, but somehow, some way, he bumped into Paul and Onesimus becomes a Christian

And at some point, Onesimus fesses up to Paul that he's a runaway slave and he's run away from a man named Philemon

At which point, Paul says, 'wait, I know a guy named Philemon' and they piece together that Onesimus has, indeed, run away from the Philemon that Paul knows

And so Paul writes this letter to Philemon to go back WITH Onesimus as he goes back to Philemon where according to the law he's really at Philemon's mercy

This letter is really short, so we're going to read the whole letter today.

For those of you who have never read the Bible before, today you're going to leave here having read ONE WHOLE BOOK of the Bible—that's an accomplishment!

If you've got a Bible turn with me to Philemon, towards the end of your Bibles, just a page or so in there.

If you don't have a Bible it'll be on the screen behind me

The letter starts with an opening greeting, which is pretty standard for the letters of Paul's day and this greeting that Paul opens with is very typical of many of his letters:

**¹ Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother,
To Philemon our dear friend and fellow worker— ² also to Apphia our sister and Archippus our
fellow soldier—and to the church that meets in your home:**

³ Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Okay, so a couple of things to note here in this opening greeting

First, Paul's in prison for the sake of his faith and ministry, this is going to come up later in the letter

And this conversation is going to happen in the context of community

This isn't just a private letter to Philemon, there's a church meeting in a home and it says grace and peace to ALL Y'ALL in verse three

Even though throughout the rest of the letter the YOU is going to be singular.

What's about to be addressed is about a decision that Philemon has to make but it affects the whole community

And it's Philemon's connectedness in the larger community that Paul is going to celebrate as he moves to the second element present in most all of his letters, this prayer of thanksgiving
I'm going to highlight the words where Paul emphasizes Philemon's relationship to the larger community

⁴ I always thank my God as I remember you in my prayers, ⁵ because I hear about your love for all his holy people and your faith in the Lord Jesus.

⁶ I pray that your partnership with us in the faith may be effective in deepening your understanding of every good thing we share for the sake of Christ. ⁷ Your love has given me great joy and encouragement, because you, brother, have refreshed the hearts of the Lord's people.

Paul is giving thanks for how Philemon's love has impacted the Christian community

This, of course, is also strategic of Paul. If you want to convince Philemon to treat Onesimus well, it's helpful to remind him that he's really good at treating people well!

Philemon, this is totally your gift! You're really good at treating people well, especially your fellow Jesus-followers!

⁸ Therefore, although in Christ I could be bold and order you to do what you ought to do, ⁹ yet I prefer to appeal to you on the basis of love. It is as none other than Paul—an old man and now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus— ¹⁰ that I appeal to you for my son Onesimus,^[b] who became my son while I was in chains. ¹¹ Formerly he was useless to you, but now he has become useful both to you and to me.

This last phrase sounds a little rough and strange

he used to be useless to you, but now that I got a hold of him, he's useful to both of us

If you introduced me to one of your friends this way, I might a little upset!

So it's important to see that Onesimus's name MEANS 'useful'—Paul here is just doing a little Greek word-play: useful, useless, see what he did there?

But more importantly, right from the start, Paul is using intense family language: ***“my son”***

He does it twice. Paul is going to bat for Onesimus, and he leads off with about as intense and weighted relational phrase as he could: ***“my son”***

Over the years, my parents built a good number of relationships with a wide network of people who just loved them

And when I graduated from college I took a ministry job where I had to raise ALL my own budget, salary, expenses, insurance, all of it, from scratch through donations

I had to raise \$26,520 in 1996 dollars, I will never forget that number, it is burned into my memory forever, traumatized me, I have PTSD anytime I see those numbers in that sequence

But I prayed and I got some good fundraising training, and I raised all that money in just about 6 weeks in gifts and/or monthly commitments—it was a record for the organization, how quickly it all came in

And when people asked me how did I do it, I just told them my parent's Christmas card list was generous. These were the people who loved my parents who my parents had kept up with over the years

Many of them hadn't seen me in a decade, they only knew me as a little kid, but they knew and loved my parents, and so they supported me

They were kind to me because I was Robert and Elizabeth Kirk's son. That's what got me funded in record time

Paul here is pushing some of those same types of relational buttons at the outset

here's my son Onesimus, and I want you to treat him better than you might because of who I am and because of my great love for and relationship with him.

Paul continues to unpack that relationship as he continues to build his case:

¹² I am sending him—who is my very heart—back to you. ¹³ I would have liked to keep him with me so that he could take your place in helping me while I am in chains for the gospel. ¹⁴ But I did not want to do anything without your consent, so that any favor you do would not seem forced but would be voluntary.

And here's where Paul makes an important turn that will impact not only Onesimus's life but millions of other lives many generations later:

¹⁵ Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back forever— ¹⁶ no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother. He is very dear to me but even dearer to you, both as a fellow man and as a brother in the Lord.

With these words, Paul is lighting a fuse that will explode many years later, but let's finish out the letter.

¹⁷ So if you consider me a partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. ¹⁸ If he has done you any wrong or owes you anything, charge it to me. ¹⁹ I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand. I will pay it back—not to mention that you owe me your very self.

²⁰ I do wish, brother, that I may have some benefit from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in Christ. ²¹ Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I ask.

22 And one thing more: Prepare a guest room for me, because I hope to be restored to you in answer to your prayers.

23 Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends you greetings. 24 And so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas and Luke, my fellow workers.

25 The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.

And thus endeth one of the shortest letters and books in the Bible—you're all biblical scholars now!

Paul is appealing to a slave owner to lay down his rights that he has under Roman law to punish or otherwise inflict harm on Onesimus

Laying down rights for the sake of someone else is always hard for ANY of us, isn't it? Any culture, any time, any rights, it's NEVER easy for us to lay down what we think our rights are in a given situation.

And he does so through all sorts of appeals, but primarily his appeal is personal, it's grounded in faith and love

Paul is the mediator in between these two parties, brokering peace and reconciliation between them when according to the law there's been a breach

But Paul is re-framing that breach in light of something bigger, more substantial, more significant—their new shared relationship with Christ

This re-frame lights the fuse that will explode in the western world over the next couple hundred centuries that will cause the dismantling of the slave trade

But before we get there, we need to acknowledge something that many people have wished Paul would have done here with this letter:

which was to speak forcefully against the whole slavery thing as the evil it is

Ancient Roman slavery wasn't as awful as much of American southern slavery, but still it's estimated that as much as 1/3 of the entire population was enslaved in some way, shape or form

But he doesn't address the big evils of slavery. And in fact, white slaveholders in America used to use this little letter in the Bible to justify slaveholding back in the day—"see, here's Paul sending a slave back to his master."

What we see with both Jesus and with all those who follow after him in the New Testament is that in some ways they're radically revolutionary, pushing all sorts of boundaries and going totally counter-cultural

And then in other ways, they prefer to operate within the confines of the culture and the system, as more moderated change elements

They are always working for redemption and transformation and change, it's just that sometimes it's more forceful and sometimes it's more subtle or slower

And the truth of the matter is there's plenty of material in the New Testament for both revolutionaries and conservatives to find something that they like

And so what happens is that we've all got our own preferences and temperaments and the temptation is to make Jesus and the rest of the New Testament fit our own personalities and political agendas

We always want God to be made in our own image and look just like us and vote just like us and act just like us—that's the constant temptation for all of us.

And so the revolutionary will talk about Jesus the radical revolutionary

And the more conservative types will point to the places where Jesus and his followers operate within the structures and confines of their culture

But the reality is Jesus and the early church is BOTH

everyone's right BUT everyone's also just picking out the parts they like and ignoring the parts that would stretch us

And if we're going to take Jesus and the rest of the New Testament seriously

we're going to have to embrace BOTH the places where it really resonates with our own preferences

AND the places where there's going to be dissonance, because God isn't made in our image, you and I were made in his but we're fallen and incomplete creatures.

And so all of us need to hear the correctives and be willing to embrace even the parts that we initially struggle with

The challenges of Jesus and the early church aren't to ANYONE'S full liking—liberals don't like the parts that sound more conservative and conservatives don't like the parts that sound more liberal

Because what Jesus has come to do doesn't fit nicely in either liberal or conservative boxes, it is better than both

Paul here is writing a personal letter to a friend on behalf of someone he loves, it's a situational letter

And he decides to not write a whole treatise on the evils of slavery and attempt to blow up the whole system

he's going to work within the confines of this system and yet still subvert it, still transform it, still challenge it with the new thing that has been unleashed in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus

And he does less than I wish he would have as I look back over the past 2,000 years and how much violence and death has been inflicted on human beings through the horrors of slavery here in our country as well as around the world

But he does do significant work here and in a couple of other places in the New Testament that tip this first domino over

that begins the domino effect that will eventually lead Jesus-followers to be at the center of the work to dismantle slavery all over the world

And the first domino being tipped is right here:

¹⁵ Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back forever— ¹⁶ no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother. He is very dear to me but even dearer to you, both as a fellow man and as a brother in the Lord.

The slave as a fellow human being and a dear brother in the Lord was a category switch that the ancient world did not have in its vocabulary

Back in the early 90's there was a band named Nirvana that started a new wave of this rock/grunge alternative sound that became known as the Seattle sound because several of these bands were out of Seattle

And Nirvana's hit song "Smells Like Teen Spirit" was pretty grungy and pretty rocky and back in those days when people still listened to the radio, they were getting lots of airplay at first ONLY on the rock stations

But one day I was driving around with my brother and we were listening to the pop Top 40 station, and Nirvana's first big song, Smells Like Teen Spirit came on this top, boppy, cutesy Top 40-station

And I remember looking at my brother and I was a nerd when it came to this sort of thing even then

And I said to him, "If Nirvana can cross over to this station and this audience, it could really change everything."

And it did. Nirvana got airplay not just on niche or rock stations but crossed into a new, bigger category, the Top 40 crowd

and that paved the way for lots more bands to make lots more money getting lots of airplay on stations all across the country

Circa 1991, Nirvana's song "Smells Like Teen Spirit" crossed over and broke out of some categories in ways that re-organized the whole music landscape that continue to impact the music industry today

This passage is the category breaking "Smells Like Teen Spirit" for slaves in the Bible

In the ancient Roman world slaves were property, not fellow humans. They were sub-human.

That's how you justified slavery in ancient Rome and later in the British empire, including and especially our own colonial America:

anyone remember the 3/5's compromise, only count 3 out of every 5 slaves as a person? Because they're not really people, they're just slaves

But Paul totally breaks that: no longer a slave, better than a slave, a dear brother, a fellow man, AND a fellow brother in the Lord

is an utterly new category for a slave holder to have to deal with and manage and know what to do with

Paul is forcing the issue that Onesimus is now someone who could no longer be considered property but now must be related to in light of their joint relationship with Christ

was this core categorical blow to the slave-trade that would contribute mightily to its undoing—that the one who was formerly a slave was now a fellow human and therefore COULD BECOME a brother or sister in Christ that Christians would have to treat as such

This was a total paradigm shift and here's what happens as the dominoes start to tip:

in my study on this passage it was suggested that this letter was preserved in part because it worked: Philemon actually did receive Onesimus as a human and a brother in Christ

And in the generation just after the biblical authors, we've got an ancient church historian who says that there was a bishop or overseer or pastor over the churches in Ephesus whose name was Onesimus.

The once-run-away slave who had been welcomed back by Philemon and treated as a brother in Christ rather than a piece of property became through his freedom a major leader in the early church

The dominoes continue to fall in thousands of lives and communities, until Christianity over-runs paganism in the ancient world

and the ethical commands of Jesus to love your neighbor for many Christians means that they no longer hold slaves

And when you're counting on slave labor to run your economy, it starts to weaken the Roman empire

and so when you get the fall of Rome in September of 476 the decay of the slave economy that had propped Rome up for so long is one piece of a complicated puzzle of how the mighty Rome was toppled

The domino effect continues to play out in thousands and then millions of more lives and more communities over hundreds of years rising up instruments of grace and mercy into the world in quiet and not-so-quiet ways

In 1780, William Wilberforce is a brilliant young and up and coming politician in the British Parliament.

In 1785 he had a dramatic conversion to Christianity and after conversations with his new faith community, he felt compelled to put an end to the slave trade in the British Colonies

In 1787 he introduced the first bill to abolish the slave trade. It was defeated. He reintroduced essentially the same bill every year for twenty years, defeated year after year after year

Until finally in 1807, 20 years later, he was rewarded for his perseverance with the passage of the Slave Trade Act which ended the slave trade in the British colonies.

He thought that would end slavery entirely, but evil has a way of adapting and morphing to fit a new environment, and the evil of slavery continued

And so he resumed the fight and pushed a new piece of legislation that would abolish slavery entirely.

championing the cause until in 1833, the Slavery Abolition Act was passed that abolished slavery in ALL the British colonies

What Wilberforce felt compelled by his faith in Christ to do in 1787, was finally brought to completion in 1833, almost 50 years of a labor of love

He died 3 days after the Slavery Abolition Act was passed. A whole life committed to participating in the domino effect of ending slavery

Of course, the dominoes continued to fall in big and small ways into the 20th Century, Dr. Martin Luther King confronts the Jim Crow South, the new way that this same evil had masked itself in our country on the other side of the abolition of slavery here

He steps in and essentially makes these same arguments to white America that Paul made back to Philemon—Easter Sunday gives him courage to not be afraid of death, and it gives him an understanding of God and of humans made in God's image that dismantles Jim Crow

The fully human black man or woman who must be respected as such
and especially the call to the southern white church-goer to respect their fellow Christian as a brother or sister in Christ who deserves a seat at the lunch counter and at the front of the bus, not just the back

And it is the black church in the American south that essentially saves much of the southern church from itself, the prophetic call to a church that used a religious veneer to cover up and

mask great evils because we're always tempted to take the parts of Scripture we like and ignore the rest, aren't we?

This domino effect continues into the 1980's in big and small ways

when a Harvard college student named Gary Haugen is a part of a campus ministry that decided they wanted to write a position paper on apartheid in South Africa

Gary heads up the project, decides as a Jesus follower that International Law would be a great place for him to bring his faith and gifts to bear to end some of the greatest injustices in the world

He goes to law school and ends up after graduating working with the likes of Desmond Tutu on a Christian response to post-apartheid South Africa

Eventually he goes to work for the Department of Justice and is loaned out to be the lead investigator for the U.N.'s investigation into the genocide in Rwanda

Finally in 1997 he starts his own organization, International Justice Mission, which is a Jesus-saturated top-notch professional organization

That is committed to ending injustice and exploitation of the poor, often including issues like slavery and human trafficking, anywhere and everywhere around the globe

IJM has been featured on 60 Minutes, Dateline, Oprah, Today Show, CNN AND Fox News, BBC, The New York Times, and the list goes on and on

Because the domino effect of good goes on and on and on, mostly in names and stories we don't know

And today, as we close this series, **the Take-W.I.T.H.** I want to leave you with 3 simple questions: **1. What if it's true? 2. What if it works? 3. what if you're invited?**

What if it's true that on Easter Sunday God actually raised a dead man back to life and introduced a whole new hope and energy and joy into our weary world?

As crazy as it sounds! What if that's the simplest and best explanation for 2,000 years of continuous, ongoing, unprecedented generosity?

What if it works? One bodily physical real actual resurrection from the dead tipping over a couple dozen people tipping over a couple thousand people that tipped over millions and ultimately billions of people over the past 2,000 years

Some big ways, mostly small ways to participate and contribute to this domino effect,

What if it works and you're invited? What if you're invited to bring your gifts, your abilities, and to step in and take your place in this wonderful, remarkable, unstoppable domino effect?