

“From Ruthless to Generous, and Enslaved to Empowered” (Vision Weekend 2015) // Philemon // *Everyday Theology* #4

Annual Report

You should have received the annual report on the way in... Incredible piece.

- It **reads like a magazine**... I hope you'll spend some time in it over the next few weeks... **We do an annual report like this, btw**, not only so you can **be aware of what God** is doing, but because want you to be amazed that he is doing it *through* you. **And to help you better figure out your role in all of this.**
- We want the Summit Church to be a movement, not an institution; and movements, by definition, move... so if you're not moving you're not really part of the movement.

You'll see some amazing stats in it (for some, you'll feel like clapping... wait to the end!)

- This year has started off with a bang. Our first Sunday of the year we had **9217** in attendance; our BRC launched on Sunday a.m. with **650** in attendance
- We've seen **19% increase** in membership. (We've had a lot of “common law” members who shack up with us on the weekend, and we've been able to make honest Christians out of ya...)
- That's an **answer to prayer** we prayed last year... Less like an event, more like a community.

- Also with that, we now have **450 small groups**
 - Going into January, our **BRC had more than 100%** of their average weekend attendance involved in a small group
- We've seen **34% increase** in weekly attendance for family ministries (which also represents growth in community) and we baptized nearly **100 students** last year
 - **All answers to the prayer “less like an event...”**
- Our **ministries to our community** has really grown:
 - We now have **119 adoptive/foster** families at the church
 - We gave a **half-million dollar grant** to launch Re:City to minister to at risk teens in downtown Durham
 - We have a thriving ministry to our prison community that baptized **11** right here...
- **Church planting: Nearly 500** went on short-term trips... Currently, we have **202 Summit members** living overseas on international church planting teams, and they have started more than **90 churches** overseas... which is an **176% increase** over last year.
 - **One of those churches, by the way**, was started last summer in Serbia by a college mission team we sent there
 - This **year a team of college graduates** is going to live there on a 2-year assignment to work with that church.
- And **speaking of college missions**... you know we encourage college students to consider spend their first 2 years after they graduate living on a missions project—our “Mormonization strategy”... We now have **8 City Project** locations and 5 “2nd City” locations where we are doing this.
- **Domestic church plants:** Last year we sent out **115 people to plant 4 churches domestically**, which brings our number of domestic plants up to **23**
 - **4 of those are in RDU.**
 - Our church plant in **Wilmington**, called “The Bridge Church,” launched two weeks ago with 420 people. They overflowed into the lobby. **Pic.**
 - Pastor Ethan said, “Most exciting was that we had a lot of non-Christians there we've been building

relationships with for the past few months, including the **owner of the building and the construction crew** that renovated it. Get this: One of the **construction workers** grew up at Homestead Heights (before it became the Summit)... fell away from the faith, moved to Wilmington. Now coming back to faith in Christ through our plant. **You can leave us, but we will find you.**

- We've **even hold services in the prison, now**, so you can't even get away from us there.
- Get this: Last year our US church plants baptized 317 people!
- This brings the total number of churches that God has planted through Summit's obedience to 113—BACK PAGE: we're 11% of the way to the vision of 1,000 he has given us. OK, THAT NEEDS APPLAUSE
- **All-In: Goal: \$26 million**; earlier last year we projected \$30.9 million; concluded All-In \$32 million. "I'm so glad that 'All-In' is done because I'm all out."
 - I hope you'll **hear this as good news**, but we're never going to be done with things like All-In...
 - Why? Because there is still 1.5 billion people in RDU unconnected to any church
 - And the day we quit doing all we can to reach them with the gospel is the day we quit being disciples of Jesus.
 - **If your idea of a church is a country club** for the affirming of the status quo, this is not the church for you.
 - I think of the words of the missionary to India C. T. Studd, *"Some people want to live in the sound of chapel bells; I want to run a mission a yard from the gates of hell."*
 - So if you say, *"I'm tired of being pushed to sacrifice and serve..."* this may not be the place for you.

OK... I'm preaching now... But what I love about this annual report, however, is it is not just stats and figures; it really presents who we are. Several articles:

- How we are trying to **grow in our love for God**: Prayer and Bible Study
- How we are trying to grow in our **love for each other**
 - Small groups
 - Diversity
- How we are trying to grow in our love for our world
 - A new initiative in the Summit Church: **Serve 365**
 - Articles about **short term mission trips** and **college missions** and what's happening through those things
- SJI: a new development in our leadership development arm.
 - Think of it like a ministry college that offers courses on topics ranging from answering the **tough questions** about the faith to **developing your Bible teaching ability** to how to be a **better parent**.

Check it all out later... My prayer for this year (put it on blog)

- That we would grow in these things:
 - Diversity (15%!)
- That we'd be a community that makes disciples who make disciples
 - And that everyone in our church would be involved... more people to catch up with BRC
- That we'd be a church that grows in its generosity.
- That we'd be a place rich with prayer
- That God would give us wisdom for strategic moves we need to make about growth (new campuses; getting permanent facilities in existing campuses)
- Maybe most of all, that we would never lose our evangelistic edge as a church:
 - Because without this, we are nothing!
 - I often tell our staff... 98% of the unbelievers in our city, our growth means nothing!

- Jesus said the Good Shepherd was not content with the 99; he went after the 1. We don't want to rejoice in the 9000 that God brought us, but go after the 1.7 million in our city who are not here.
 - I want you to be involved: "Who is your one?"

Gen 12:1–3: I felt a renewed sense that this was a promise *for us*. I will make you a blessing. I will make this church great, but not for its own sake... but so that you can be a blessing to this community? Do you believe that, Summit Church? Say Amen.

Philemon

Today we are going to **briefly look at a New Testament book** that I think **captures the heart of our vision**: the book of Philemon. The book comes right after Titus, which, of course, we just finished, and really is an extension of its thought... so consider this a **bonus track** on the *Everyday Theology* series.

Philemon is one of the shortest books in the Bible (1 page: 335 words). It is actually a **postscript** attached to the book of Colossians. It is a really interesting story: Philemon was a **Roman nobleman** who lived in Colossae whom **Paul had led to Christ** on a mission trip there. Well, **Philemon was wealthy**, and he had a bunch of servants, and **one of them, named Onesimus** stole a bunch of stuff from his house and ran away to Rome.

Well, then, in a **crazy twist** of providence, Onesimus runs into the Apostle Paul, who is being held in a minimum-security prison there in Rome.

So, **Paul leads him to Christ**, then **finds out Onesimus** is a runaway slave, who had stolen a bunch of stuff from Paul's friend Philemon, and so **Paul sends him back** to turn himself in.

As he's going, he **gives him a letter to carry** to the church in Colossae (the book of Colossians now in your Bible), and to that letter he **attaches this little postscript** as a private letter to Philemon. And so he says, Philemon 6:

[6] I am praying that you (Philemon) will put into action the generosity that comes from your faith as you understand and experience all the good things we have in Christ. [8] Accordingly, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do what is required, [9] yet for love's sake I prefer to appeal to you—I, Paul, an old man and now a prisoner also for Christ Jesus— [10] I appeal to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I became in my imprisonment. [11] (Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful (A play on words: 'Onesimus' in Greek means 'useful.' Onesimus was useless; now he lives up to his name 'useful.') to you and to me.) More than just his previous usefulness to you as a household servant; he has usefulness (Onesimus) in the kingdom of God!

[12] I am sending him back to you, sending my very heart. [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, [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. [15] For this perhaps is why he was parted from you for a while, that you might have him back forever, [16] no longer as a bondservant but more than a bondservant, as a beloved brother... [17] So if you consider me your partner, receive him as you would receive me. [18] If he has wronged you at all, or owes you anything, charge that to my account. 19 I, Paul, write this with my own hand: I will repay it—to say nothing of your owing me even your own self."

- OK, so Paul is pretty good at the guilt trip... I have a Jewish Christian friend who says, "Clearly here Paul had a Jewish mother, laying on that kind of guilt trip. That's a talent."
 - He says, "So... Philemon, while you **languish around in your luxurious house**, with servants... I, an **old man**, am here in **prison** for the gospel. I've led **Onesimus** to Christ,

and he really feels a call toward ministry and I could really use his help now... but if you **really want to take him back**, I guess you can. **By the way, did I remind you that I led you to Christ and without me you'd be on your way to hell?**

- Well, if you can't find it in your heart to do that, when I get out of prison, I'll come personally pay his debts. It's up to you."

And then Paul concludes with this: **²²One more thing—please prepare a guest room for me, for I am hoping that God will answer your prayers and let me return to you soon.** In other words, "Oh yeah, I'm also going to be there in a few months, and I'd like to stay at your house, which would make this **really, really awkward** if you don't do what I'm asking. (And **furthermore, this letter is going to be in the Bible** so if you don't do this you'll be known for the rest of eternity as 'that guy.' But **no pressure.**")

And, of course, **Onesimus is the one** who delivers this letter, so he's kind of standing there... **grinning...** saying, "What do you say, Uncle Phi?"

OK, before we do anything else, let's deal with the obvious question:

Does the Bible here condone slavery?

It **seems pretty clear** that there is some kind of ownership that Philemon has over Onesimus. **In recognizing that**, is Paul legitimizing slavery? **Great question. Sadly**, some Christians throughout history have interpreted it that way. But that is a very simplistic, and wrong, understanding. **3 things to remember:**

1. The "bondservant" here is nothing like what we think of when we say, "slave" (i.e. where you take someone captive and force them into labor.)

- That kind of slavery is explicitly condemned in the Bible:
 - "Anyone who kidnaps another and sells him must be put to death" (Ex. 21:16).

- Or, in 1 Tim 1:8–10 Paul puts slave traders in the same category as those who kill their parents, adulterers, perjurers, and perverts.
- So, that **can't be the kind of servant** Onesimus was. This was more like what **we think of as indentured servanthood**; and it was part of the economic system in Rome.
 - **If someone became extremely poor, or consumed with debt, the only thing left for them to sell was their labor.** So in agreement for paying off debts and the promise of provision they would sell themselves to a wealthy person like Philemon.
- Now, that's **not to say this was a good system**, or that it **ever part of God's plan...**
 - In the **original creation** God never intended for us to own each other: he gave us dominion over the earth; not over other humans.
- Which leads me to #2...

2. The New Testament subverts the entire premise of (any form of) slavery.

- The **entire NT ethic can be summarized** as, "Do to others as you would have them do to you" and "love your neighbor as yourself."
- It **calls us to treat one another** as "brothers and sisters," and tells us that **in Christ there is neither** "slave nor free."
 - A verse Paul often uses to close his letters is "*Greet one another with a holy kiss.*" As a teenager, I always asked, "When is someone going to preach on that verse? Why don't we take that literally?" Then my dad pointed out that a) Paul was calling for a "holy" kiss, which was not the kind of kiss I had in mind; b) you were to apply it to both men and women alike. So that took care of that desire.
- **The kiss symbolized equality** and family relationships, and it is a reminder of the kind of love we should have for each other.
 - So right after church **grab someone who looks new** and plant a big, sloppy wet kiss on them and say, "I'm so glad you're my brother in Christ." *JK: That's the surest way to make sure they will never come back.* (Although some of

you single guys just thought, “Thank you JESUS! Permission from the pastor...” This is the best church ever! Sorry to disappoint).

- **But, the bigger point:** In Christ, masters and servants become brothers and sisters. That new view of humanity would ultimately undo any form of slavery.
- *The **ground is level** at the foot of the cross: one RACE: human. One CLASS: sinner. One HOPE: JESUS. One FUTURE: resurrection. One FORTUNE: the eternal riches of Christ.*
- *Which leads to #3...*

3. Rather than issuing a political manifesto, God planted seeds which undid the current order.

- *Had God said, “This system is wrong; get rid of it now,”* Jesus followers may have focused exclusively on political action. (And **there is a time** to work politically). **But God had a different way** of going about his agenda on earth: he was transforming the world from within, and the place he started was in the church.
- **Eventually, this new vision of humanity will transform** the whole society, but it starts in the church.
 - **D.A. Carson says that the best work on slavery is by an African-American scholar** named Thomas Sowell. Massive: 3 vols. He points out slavery was universal. The terrible European slave trade trafficked 11 million Africans; but twice that many were bought and sold on the Arabian Peninsula during that same time period.¹ Furthermore, he says, almost every slave he says sold in the European slave trade were enslaved and sold to them by other Africans. So, in other words, slavery was a nearly universal problem.
 - Yet you have an enormous amount of guilt literature coming out of the West, but none out of Arabia.
 - And the efforts to stop slavery came from the West. Why, he asks? *Slavery is universal, but what stopped*

slavery it in the West? His answer? Undeniably, **the Great Awakening**: The preaching of men like John Wesley and the reforms of Christian statesman William Wilberforce.

- **The gospel plants seeds that ultimately undid the broken systems of the world from within.**
 - Yes, Christians have been hypocritical with this down through history. But when they really reckoned with the gospel (as in the Great Awakening), it brought the entire system of slavery down on its head!
- That’s what Paul is doing here in Philemon. He says in **vs. 8**, *“I could command you to do what is required. I could drop the ‘Apostle’ bomb and order you around. But I’d rather press the gospel into your heart and tell you to obey the implications. Because that is real change! I’d rather see you transformed by love than berated with law.”* That kind of change is permanent, and beautiful, and leads to a new world order!

So, what did Philemon do with this letter?

- *It never tells us... but ask yourself this: How did this little letter get in the Bible?* It was a private letter sent only to Philemon, which means he would have had the only copy. To get into wide circulation, he would have had to put it there. And I don’t think he would have said, “Hey, here’s this letter Paul wrote with counsel I completely ignored.” No, evidently he did exactly what Paul urged: he forgave Onesimus of his debts and released him, even at great personal cost to himself. They then circulated this letter as a picture of the new world order the gospel created in the churches.
- **And here’s where it gets even more interesting...** A few decades later, a church leader Ignatius referred to an elderly bishop of Ephesus named Onesimus (which scholars say would have been a very uncommon name among people in leadership positions). Many scholars, based on the timing and the context of Ignatius’ reference, believe this to be the Onesimus of Philemon.

¹ D. A. Carson, “The Emerging Church,” talk given at Cedarville University.

So what we see in the book of Philemon is a beautiful picture of gospel and the mission of the church.

- **Philemon is a ruthless businessman** transformed into a beautiful picture of generosity.
- **Onesimus is a pilfering thief** transformed into the leader of one of the most important churches in the ancient world.

Can you see why I think there's no better picture of the vision of our church than this book?

A. We want to see 'Philemons' in our church become radically generous participants in the mission of God.

- We have a *lot* of *Philemons* in this church, I believe, who are sincere in their faith, pretty regular at the church, but they have **yet to ask the really hard questions** about how God wants to use their lives in his mission. To give and serve where it *is costly*.
- **It's not that they are evil**, just that life for them has been about building their kingdom.
 - **They use people, like Philemon used Onesimus.** It's not that it's *illegal*, just self-focused.
 - God wants you to **become a person** who is characterized by grace and generosity, where you **ask not, "What do I have to give?"** But, "*How can I best leverage my life for God's kingdom?*"
- Last November I presented to you the **Generosity Ladder**: On it, we tried to chart how people grow in generosity.
 - The idea is that God has called us to grow **more and more in Christlikeness**. Discipleship is not about **meeting some 'minimum requirement'** like the tithe you check off.
 - **It's all yours. You tell me.**" **FAITHFULNESS IN THE 90%. And you want to grow each year in your generosity.**
 - **There is a couple in our church in their mid-30's** with young kids that felt led by the Lord in All-In to grow their generosity to increase their generosity by 5% per year as long as they can stand it.
- At the **start of All-In** were giving away 12%

- In 2013 they achieved 20%
- In 2014—tried to get to 25%, but ended up around 22%
- I asked, "How high will you go?" They said, "Well, if we can get our business to the right place, we'd like to one day give 100% of our annual income to God's work."
- Now, I'm not saying your plan has to look exactly like theirs, but you see a mentality—"I want to leverage more and more of what God has given me for his kingdom. It's all yours, God, and I want to grow, yearly, in our generosity."
 - **SO LET ME ENCOURAGE YOU: Now that All-In is over**, don't slide back into old sporadic giving patterns. Increase your commitment the kingdom of God! Be a **Philemon!**
- This **applies to all areas** of your life, not just your money... What if you looked at **all of your life** this way? **Time, talents.**
- **It's time for you to get engaged. Jesus did not save you to sideline you**; he has a prime spot for you right on the front lines of the game.
 - **RUN the PLAY!** Tom Brady
 - It's time for you to get off your **blessed assurance** and do something; to start standing on the promises rather just sitting on the premises. Premises someone else paid for, btw.
- **SPECTATOR/DISCIPLE**
- **It starts with small steps: giving financially** to the kingdom for the first time; **reaching out** to someone and inviting them to church; **volunteering**; joining a **small group**... **Campus pastors will tell you...**
- **I would counsel you with** what Paul said to Philemon: **[6] "I am praying that you will put into action the generosity that comes from your faith as you understand and experience all the good things we have in Christ."** "*Generosity that comes from your faith.*" Translation: **What kind of generosity does your faith demand?**
 - Think about how much of your life is owing to grace: **experience and understand** those good things

- You think you are a self-made man, Philemon? Where would you be without Jesus?
- I'm an American through and through. I believe in personal initiative and that God has given us the ability to prosper and do great things and the government should mostly just stay out of our way... but think for a minute about how much of your success you owe to others. You had **no control over your talents** you received... owes more to the DNA given by your parents. Your **health**; your **country of birth**... all these things are a gift!
- That's **not even to mention** the price Jesus paid to free you from sin.
- That **DEMANDS** something.
- SELF-MADE MEN GO TO HELL: What you made by yourself was a mess of condemnation. **What Jesus gave you, when you were helpless**, was his grace. **You say, "I don't like hand-outs."** You better start. He saved you when you were helpless entirely as a gift of grace.
- So as **he loved us**, brothers and sisters, we ought also to love one another.
 - We're **not self-made**; we're **blood bought**. And that makes us **grace-filled**.

And (B) We want to see the Onesimuses (what's the plural of that—**Onesimi? Onesimoi?)** **of our community become world-changing leaders.**

- **Slavery is a picture of sin**, is it not? Many in our community are enslaved to sinful passions; idolatries; selfishness; lusts; even things like drugs. Many of you.
- Sin destroys our usefulness. God created you to be useful, but sin has made you useless. **We believe the gospel liberates** to be what God created you to be!
- And useful in ways so much bigger than you ever realized!

- **Paul said to Philemon—Onesimus** is not just useful for labor... to wait your tables... God has a plan for him in his kingdom."
- **Dennis:** Prisoner who got baptized, is involved in our Summit campus there, and wants to go overseas on the mission field after he's out.
 - The world tells Dennis, "Rehabilitate. Get a job. Becomes useful to society again." God says, "yes, but I've got even more. I am putting my Spirit in you and am going to use you as a blessing in my kingdom!"
- **Amber L in our church**, who "I was a rebel teen who partied hard, sold and did drugs, aborted a baby, and became a high dollar hooker...then Jesus called me to himself and now I lead a ministry to unwed mothers called First Choice helping them put back together their lives after making disastrous decisions and helping them avoid making those decisions. She leads a lot of our ministries here...
- From useless to useful.

Here's what excites me: *What enslaved person—rehabilitating prisoner, what high school dropout, what rebellious teenager, what hungover college student, or girl that just had an abortion, is here this weekend that is the next generation's great Christian leader?*

Onesimuses: God has a plan for you! You have received grace. God pursued you to Rome! He has a plan for you. **Philemons: God has a plan for you.** Think about how much you owe grace, and treat others as you have been treated!

*The truth is that we are all Onesimus, and we are all Philemons. We are all **enslaved to sin**; we've all **done great wrong**; and we're all people who **have been shown lavish generosity**. That makes us a community of equals and people of great grace.*

- Rom 10:11, For there is no difference... (V-Day)

*The gospel transforms the **ruthless into the generous; the enslaved into the empowered.** It levels the oppressor and the oppressed alike, exalting one out of slavery and humbling the other with grace. It redeems us both with mercy and makes us sit down together as brothers in Christ, where there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, neither male nor female, no hierarchy, for we are all one in Christ Jesus!*

This starts this weekend on a personal level...

- **If you are in the position of an Onesimus** who has done wrong (even if you felt justified), you need to go, today, and make it right.
 - Even if it makes you really uncomfortable or you risk some kind of severely negative consequence. (Onesimus could have gone to prison, or worse!)
- **If you are in the position of Philemon**, and someone has wronged you, you need to let it go.²
 - I'm not saying it is easy.
 - But here's how to think about it: How gracious has *Jesus* been to you? How much of your life is owed to grace?
 - Can you say, like Paul, "charge it to my account?"
 - Who else said that? "Charge it to my account." 2 COR 5:21
 - 1 Tim 1:15
 - How are you treating the Onesimuses in your life?

Conclusion

Last thing: Think for a minute about how crazy this situation was. Onesimus, a runaway slave, runs into Paul, the guy who led his former owner to Christ...in Rome? A few things I know about Rome... I went to visit a few years ago... it is huge. This just "happened?"

- My favorite verse in Philemon: [15] *For this perhaps is why he was parted from you for a while, that you might have him back forever, [16] no longer as a bondservant but more than a bondservant, as a beloved brother...*
- **Do you sense that is happening to you this weekend;** that sovereignty has been pursuing you? Maybe that's why you are here... I want you to know that God has so much more for you than you have ever realized! **He wants to transform** your life... to **make you into something useful** in his kingdom; to be a blessing to others.
- *Are you ready to get started with that?*

*It starts with receiving the price Jesus paid for your sin as your own. **Jesus, I cannot** save myself; I need you to save me. **Jesus, I surrender** the rest of my life to you."*

For believers: "experience and understand" the good things you have in Christ~

² From Larry Osborne, "Philemon."