

May 17th, 2026 An Old Future: The Power of the Gospel of Jesus Christ

The Gospel and the fellowship of Faith

Philemon 1:4-7 Rev. Donghyeok Kim

1. What Does True Relationship Look Like?

The world we live in makes it extraordinarily difficult to form genuine human relationships. People betray one another, harbor hatred, and deceive. There is an old Korean proverb that captures this well: "You can know what lies ten fathoms deep in water, but you cannot know what lies one fathom deep in a person's heart." And that is exactly right. Knowing another person's heart completely is not only impossible — if we ever did catch a full glimpse of it, the shock would be overwhelming.

In a world of mutual suspicion and quiet animosity, forming truly personal, dignified relationships is enormously difficult. This is why we tend to watch what people do before we listen to what they say. No matter how fluently someone speaks, if their actions consistently fail to match their words, the likelihood that their words are empty is very high. On the other hand, even someone who struggles to articulate themselves — if their actions are clear and consistent — that consistency is itself evidence that they are a person of integrity.

For two people to enter into a genuinely true relationship, each needs to be oriented toward benefiting the other. Put differently: if you approach someone thinking, "What can I get from this person?" genuine relationship becomes very hard to build. But if you approach someone thinking, "How can I be of benefit to this person?" — that relationship will not go wrong.

2. The Relationship Between Paul and Philemon

Today's passage marks the beginning of Paul's move toward making his actual request — asking Philemon to receive Onesimus. Before he gets there, Paul first establishes the nature of his relationship with Philemon. The text tells us that Paul was a man who prayed for Philemon — always, without exception.

I pray too, but I cannot pray for every person in the world. So there are specific people I carry in my prayers. First, the members of our church. Second, people I know personally. Third, the pastors around me and the work of their churches. Here is the question: what does prayer require? It requires remembering. You can only pray for someone if you are paying attention to them. I cannot pray for someone I have never met and know nothing about. Which means that the simple fact that I am praying for someone is evidence that I care about them — that I want to see them flourish in Christ.

Paul prayed for Philemon with Philemon in mind. And every time he did, a confession rose spontaneously from somewhere deep in him: "God, thank You."

3. Why Paul Was Grateful — Love and Faith

The reason for that gratitude was something Paul had heard about Philemon's character. Every time Paul prayed for Philemon, genuine thankfulness to God welled up in him — not as a duty, but as a natural response to what he had been hearing. And what he had been hearing was rooted in two specific qualities Philemon possessed.

The first was love. Philemon appears to have been a person whose heart was full of it. There are people like that — people whose love expresses itself in comfort, encouragement, and warmth toward others. For a church leader especially, this quality of love is an extraordinary gift. And what is the defining mark of love? It is the character of God himself. Paul describes it in First Corinthians: love is patient, love is kind, it does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. Philemon was that kind of person. And the love in question was directed specifically toward the members of the church at Colossae — which is why Paul describes it as love "for all the saints."

The second quality was faith. Philemon was a man of faith. What does it mean to have faith? It means not being easily shaken. It means not veering to the left or to the right. When I look honestly at myself, I am not sure I find much in there to inspire confidence. My heart shifts. I catch myself being inconsistent, and I'm reminded again of how far I fall short. But Philemon was a man of faith — faith directed toward Christ. When a church's leader demonstrates that kind

of steady, Christ-centered faithfulness, how settled and secure must the members of that church feel? If a pastor's trust is placed in money, or in attendance numbers, or in his own abilities — that is an unstable foundation. But Philemon's faith was in Christ. That is why Paul uses that phrase: faith toward Christ.

4. What Is the Fellowship of Faith?

Paul was grateful that both of these qualities — love and faith — were present in Philemon, because these are precisely what give rise to the fellowship of faith. Some of you may find that phrase a little awkward. After all, when we gather for a meal together and talk, we are not necessarily opening our Bibles and working through doctrine. It can feel as though there is no fellowship of faith happening at all. But fellowship of faith is not defined by whether every conversation is theologically framed. A better way to understand it might be this: it is the deepening and enriching of our knowledge of Christ that takes place across every area of our lives as Christians — in the midst of all of it, not just the officially "spiritual" parts. Or to say it more simply: it is the grace of Christ showing up in the whole of our lives, and us recognizing it together.

Here is an example. Say that last week you had a serious argument with your spouse — harsh words, real conflict. And then, in the middle of it, the cross of Jesus came to mind. You went to your spouse and asked for forgiveness, and you were reconciled. That is fellowship of faith. It shows how Christ is still at work, even now, in the ordinary rhythms of daily life. This is not about sharing insights you picked up from a book — it is about experiencing the actual movement of God in your real life. And that experience connects to a deep and genuine knowledge of good things, because God is at work in each of our lives individually. The forms this takes are endlessly varied, but every thread leads back to Christ.

In other words, what Paul is grateful for is not that Philemon is preaching lofty abstractions. He is grateful that Philemon is sitting with the members of the Colossian church — one person at a time — and drawing out the stories of what Christ has done in their lives, sharing in those stories, and allowing that sharing

to deepen and widen the knowledge of Christ. He is doing this with love and faith. And Paul is grateful.

5. The Fellowship of Faith Happens in Ordinary Life

Does this kind of fellowship exist among you? The conversations we have week to week may not always look particularly holy. But can a conversation about a great restaurant you discovered last week become a holy conversation? Can a story about a hard week at work become an exchange of faith? The answer is yes — it can. Because that is our lives. And in the middle of our lives, we are not just venting and complaining — we are finding Christ. What seems like ordinary talk, when it happens among people who share the same faith, has a way of working its way toward sacred knowledge.

Some of you may not have anyone to have that kind of conversation with. Maybe you seem strong in your faith when you are alone — you pray, you read — but you have no believing friends, no fellow travelers in the faith. Everyone around you makes it awkward to even bring up the name of Jesus. If that is you, you are essentially in spiritual isolation.

This is why large churches can be dangerous. There is a phrase — "loneliness in a crowd" — and it describes exactly what can happen when a church becomes very large. The bigger the crowd, the less likely it is that deep fellowship of faith will naturally occur. The greater the crowd, the easier it becomes to hide inside it. You can disappear, and still reassure yourself that your faith is fine — after all, you attend a well-known, successful church. I am not saying this is true of everyone. But the conditions that make it possible to avoid being spiritually challenged, to avoid being truly known, become more prevalent as a church grows.

Jesus himself was consistently wary of crowds and their agendas. After the feeding of the five thousand, the crowd tried to seize him and make him king by force. Jesus withdrew to the mountain alone. Instead, he invested himself in twelve — training a small number of people with depth and intentionality. He was doing intensive pastoral work with a few.

The issue is not numbers — it is whether fellowship of faith is happening. Even large churches can foster real fellowship through small groups, and many do. The danger is not largeness itself — it is being excluded from the fellowship of faith.

When I planted this church, one of the things I prayed about consistently was the teenagers of this community. Every time I drove past Tahoma High School and watched students pour out of the building, I found myself asking: is there any space in their lives where they can seriously ask questions about Jesus? Where they can actually talk about what faith means? Most youth ministries exist, but a lot of them are focused primarily on keeping students entertained. What I discovered was a scarcity of places where young people could sit down together and have an honest conversation about the gospel, about Scripture, about what it means to believe. That is what I kept praying for. Fellowship of faith is built through the church, and it is made possible through people of faith.

6. A Joy and Comfort That Refreshes Others

When Paul heard about all of this — Philemon's love, his faith, the fellowship of faith that was taking root in the Colossian church, the way knowledge of Christ was maturing among the people — what did he feel? Joy. That is Paul's own word. And he records that not only he, but many of the saints, had found rest and comfort in their hearts.

Philemon's ministry reached beyond Colossae. The news of what was happening there brought joy and peace to Christians far beyond that one congregation. A single person's genuine, rooted commitment to God's word carries an influence that travels far. God calls one person and changes a world through them — sometimes one church, sometimes a city, sometimes a nation, sometimes something larger still. The calling of every Christian is to be a person of good influence wherever they are placed.

Some people carry that influence into a family. A woman I know grew up in a home with no faith at all. After she encountered Jesus, her entire family came to believe. The influence of the gospel moved through her and reached people she loved. We do not need to change the whole world. If a single person

is transformed, that is enough — because when a person is transformed, their whole life is transformed with them.

Philemon was a person of good influence — not only to a great apostle like Paul, but to every believer who heard the news of what was happening in Colossae. Because of his love and faith, the gospel in that church was no longer confined to pages and propositions. It had moved off the page and into the actual lives of people — through the fellowship of faith, through the sharing of what Christ was doing in each person's story.

7. The Gospel Is Not a Story in a Book — It Is a Story in a Life

The gospel is not a story trapped between two covers. It is a power that actively works — the very power of God. The gospel is what drives good influence outward into the world. Anyone who genuinely encounters this gospel finds themselves captivated by its power, dependent on its power, and compelled to pass it on.

To live by faith means releasing this gospel to do what it does — taking it off the shelf and reading it in real life, so that it can exercise its influence on the people around us. The gospel has the power to raise the dead. The gospel has the power to heal. The gospel is a force that breaks the chains of the enemy.

Last week, I visited a prisoner who had fallen into complete despair. He had been incarcerated for a long time. Years of self-harm, suicide attempts, and illness had convinced him that his life was beyond repair. He was being held in the most restrictive unit of the facility — the last place they put someone when nothing else has worked — strapped into a chair. He had attacked staff. He had harmed himself. He had tried to end his life. There was no other option but to restrain him. No one was able to reach him. No one could find words that meant anything to a man who wanted to die.

When I arrived, he had already been through an episode that day. A corrections officer sat nearby watching him around the clock. He was bound to the chair, his whole body restrained. I walked over to him and said: "I've been looking forward to studying the Bible with you. When do you think we could do

that?" The man who had seemed utterly closed — hardened all the way through — looked at me and said: "You're my last hope. I think I can do it tomorrow, once they move me to solitary." Tears were running down his face.

I cannot change him. But God can. I believe that if this man — isolated from society, considered a danger to everyone around him — encounters Jesus and receives the gospel, he will find a reason and a hope to live. Because that same gospel changed me. Our weapons are not physical. Our battle is not against flesh and blood. But we are powerful.

Pastor's Column

"Hi" Anyone Who Was Floating on the Water Yesterday — Get Up Here!"

My elementary school was in the countryside — so rural that a bus came by only once every hour or two. When classes ended, the teachers would take the bus into town, while my friends and I made our way home along the road toward town, playing as we went.

Following the stream on our walk home, there was no shortage of things to do. In spring, we strolled past wildflowers blooming here and there. In summer, we stripped down and jumped in — I kept my underwear on, but a few friends had no such reservations. In autumn, we'd raid the apple orchards. Winter was the real challenge. The stream would thin out, and wherever it curved, wide patches of ice would form. The cold winds of Gangwon Province made the ice thick and solid.

My friends and I would find a wide bend in the frozen stream, smash the ice away from the bank with rocks, punch a hole in the middle, jam a stick through it, and pole our way home like gondoliers. It was one of the best games winter had to offer. The ice was wide and thick enough to hold two or three kids with room to spare.

That day, same as always, we climbed down to the stream. We broke off a slab of ice from the bank, clambered on top, and began poling our way downstream. It was glorious. Then came the problem: the ice was slowly sinking. The weight of three kids was too much. At first it was just enough to dampen our shoes; before long, the water was up to our ankles. We rode that sinking ice raft, standing on it as it slowly disappeared beneath us, all the way until it gave out completely. Meanwhile, the bus headed into town rolled right past us — with our teachers on board.

The next morning at school, during the opening assembly, our teacher walked in carrying a switch. Then he said it:

"Anyone who was floating on the water yesterday — get up here!"

At first, no one had any idea what he meant. How does a person float on water? So nobody moved. But then it hit me — from the bus window, with

the ice nearly submerged, it must have looked exactly like we were standing on the surface of the water. I stood up first and walked to the front. The others followed.

The teacher wasn't furious, exactly, but he gave us a good scolding — what were we thinking, playing like that in the stream? Then he gave us each a whack.

I didn't feel like we'd done anything terribly wrong, so the punishment didn't sting as much as it might have. It seemed like something kids just did, and I figured the teacher was only trying to make sure we didn't do it again. Though now, looking back with adult eyes, I do wonder — was that really something worth hitting us for?

Either way, it's nothing but a fond memory now. And when I think about it sometimes, I try to imagine what must have gone through that teacher's mind. From where he sat on that bus, his own students were drifting downstream, standing upright on the water. How utterly baffling that must have been. He must have turned it over in his mind all night, because the very next morning he came in ready.

Did he know we'd been riding a block of ice? Or did some small part of him wonder if we'd been walking on water — like Jesus himself?