

Sermon: Philemon – The Faith to Be Changed

Scripture: Philemon 1

Introduction – Receiving a Hard Word

How many of you have heard of the “compliment sandwich”?

It’s when you need to give someone feedback that might be hard to hear, so you tuck it between two nice things. First you say something affirming, then you slip in the hard truth, then you close with another compliment.

For example: *“You are such a great team player. But you’ve been late to every meeting this week and needs to change. We really value your voice.”*

It’s a way of softening the blow. Now how many of you have either given or received a compliment sandwich. Did it work? And by work did it make the critique easier to hear? Did it cause a change in behavior? I’m not that fond of the compliment sandwich and I think now a days I don’t think leadership training is encouraging this method any more.

BUT The reason its exists is because receiving hard words is not easy. None of us likes to be told that we need to change, or grow, or do something differently. Right?

Philemon's Compliment Sandwich

The book of Philemon—a 1 page a letter from Paul to Philemon— is a little like a compliment sandwich.

Paul is writing to Philemon about Onesimus (Oh Nes i mus) which is Philemon's slave. Now Paul is writing this letter from prison. (Because, well faith leaders that call people to question the empire are dangerous. But we aren't going to go into that today.) See we aren't really told how Onesimus ends up there with Paul but nevertheless he is...did Philemon's slave run away, did Philemon send him to help Paul? We aren't sure. But what we are sure of is that Paul becomes really close to Onesimus and in doing so he is compelled to write Philemon asking him to welcome him back as a brother in Christ rather than a slave.

Paul praises Philemon's love, his hospitality, his faith. But right in the middle of that "compliment sandwich" is a challenge: *Your faith is real. Now live it more deeply than you ever have before.* Release your slave. Accept him as your brother. And if he is indebted to you in anyway...you can charge me instead. Paul is calling Philemon to Grow deeper / to rise higher...

Why It's Hard to Receive Hard Words

There are few things harder than receiving a hard word from someone we respect.

- A parent who points out that our attitude isn't lining up with who we want to be.
- A mentor who says, "I think you can do better."

- A friend who lovingly tells us the truth we don't want to hear.

It doesn't feel good. It unsettles us. And yet sometimes, those hard words are exactly what we need to grow.

So why is it so hard to receive them?

It unsettles us. It stirs our ego, our fear, even our sense of security.

For one, it touches our **ego**. Most of us want to see ourselves as competent, kind, faithful. When someone points out where we fall short, it feels like a crack in the image we've built of ourselves.

It also stirs up **fear**. Fear that maybe we're not enough. Fear of failure. Fear that people will think less of us.

And sometimes, hard words feel like a **threat to our security**. If we change, what will it cost?

Will it mean giving something up—comfort, reputation, control?

So when the hard word comes, our first instinct is usually to defend ourselves: *"That's not fair.*

You don't understand. That's just how I am." We justify why we act the way we do.

But here's the paradox: the very words we resist the most often carry the seed of our transformation. They are invitations to grow into something we can't yet see.

Paul's Word to Philemon

And that's exactly where Philemon finds himself — holding a letter from Paul. But notice: Paul doesn't start with condemnation. He starts with affirmation. He tells Philemon, *"I see the love in you. I see the faith in you."* And then he says, *"Because I see that, I believe you can rise to this moment."*

That's what real critique is. It isn't a put-down. It's a call up.

Paul isn't writing because Philemon is faithless. He's writing because Philemon is faithful — and Paul believes that faith can grow even deeper. In fact, Paul reminds him: *"You are known for your love. You refresh the hearts of the saints. The church meets in your home."*

So when Paul asks Philemon to welcome Onesimus back not as a slave but as a brother, it isn't a slap on the wrist. It's a vote of confidence.

I remember as a teenager, my mom was getting on to me about something. I don't even remember what the issue was. But I do remember blurting out — in the most exasperated teenage voice — *"Why are you being so hard on me? It's not like I'm out there drinking, doing drugs, or skipping school!"*

And she looked at me calmly and said, *"It's because I know you. I know you can do better. I know there's more in you than what I'm seeing right now."*

In the moment, it felt like criticism. But looking back, it was actually a deep expression of love.

That's what Paul is doing here. He isn't tearing Philemon down. He's calling him up. He's saying:

"I see the good in you. I see what God has already done. And I believe there's more — more love, more courage, more faith waiting to emerge."

That's the way of Jesus. It's a journey, not a destination. We are on a path toward being perfected in love. And no matter how long we've been following Christ — even if we're leaders, and we attend church every Sunday, even if people look up to us — there is always room to be called higher.

And that's true for us too. Through the people who love us enough to tell us the truth, through the relationships that stretch us, God is calling us higher. The only question is: will we have the courage to receive it?

Because the truth is, most of us are more like Philemon than Onesimus.

We're not the powerless in this letter. We're the ones with homes, jobs, communities, and some degree of comfort or influence.

And that means we are the ones who have to decide what to do when God calls us higher.

- When a friend or spouse tells us a hard truth — will we get defensive, or will we listen?
- When someone younger than us asks us to see the world differently — will we brush them off, or will we be open to grow?

- When a child mirrors back our impatience or treatment of the other—will we let it teach us?
- When the gospel unsettles our comfort and challenges us to live in new ways — will we cling to what we know, or will we let love lead us?

It's easier to hear stories where we identify with the oppressed, the underdog, the one who gets set free. But sometimes Scripture holds up a mirror and says: *you are Philemon*.

You are the one with choices to make about power, about welcome, about whether you will let love be the rule of your life.

Faith doesn't grow best in the abstract. Faith grows in relationships—in the everyday ways we bump into each other and have to choose love again. Relationships are the lab where faith is tested, stretched, and deepened.

And here's the grace: when God calls us higher, it is never because God thinks we're worthless.

It's because God sees the good in us, and God knows there's more waiting to emerge.

The Enneagram is one tool that helps us see the patterns we fall into in our relationships.

And what it shows us is this: we don't all resist growth in the same way.

Each of us gets stuck differently.

And each of us needs a different hard word to be called higher.

For some of us — especially the Ones among us - the perfectionists— the pattern is relating by correcting, critiquing, pointing out flaws, being very rigid.

The hard word for you might be: *"Put down the red pen. Choose compassion over correction."*

For the Helpers, the Twos — the stuck pattern is always over-giving, fixing, inserting yourself where you weren't asked.

The hard word is: *"Stop fixing. Start listening. Make space for the other person's needs — and for your own."*

For the Threes — the Achievers — the pattern is performance. Relating by proving, impressing, competing for approval.

The word for you is: *"You don't have to impress to be loved. Be honest, even if it makes you look less successful."*

For the Fours — the Individualists — the pattern is retreating into feelings, comparing yourself, or withdrawing when you feel misunderstood.

The word for you is: *"Show up for others, even when it's messy. Don't make absence your protest."*

For the Fives — the Investigators — the pattern is holding back, keeping distance, conserving energy by staying on the edges.

The hard word is: *"Step in. Enter the relationship. Give of yourself, even when it feels costly."*

For the Sixes — the Loyalists — the pattern is suspicion and anxiety. You relate by scanning for danger, second-guessing yourself and everyone else.

The word for you is: *"Trust the person in front of you. Act in faith instead of waiting for guarantees."*

For the Sevens — the Enthusiasts — the pattern is avoiding pain by keeping it light, distracting, moving on to the next fun thing.

The word is: *“Stay in the hard conversation. Don’t rush past the pain. Sit with it.”*

For the Eights — the Challengers — the pattern is intensity, control, always pushing.

The word for you is: *“Soften. Let the other person lead. Strength here looks like gentleness.”*

For the Nines — the Peacemakers — the pattern is disappearing. Going along to get along.

Avoiding conflict.

The word is: *“Speak up. Say what you want. Your voice matters in this relationship.”*

Do you hear how different those words are?

The challenge isn’t one-size-fits-all.

But the point is the same: God calls each of us higher through our relationships.

Because that’s where faith is lived.

Not in the abstract. Not in isolation.

But in the ordinary, everyday ways we treat one another.

Conclusion – The Face of Faith

Philemon is not remembered because he was perfect. He is remembered because he was asked to change — and his decision had ripple effects: on Onesimus, on the church in his home, on the witness of the gospel itself.

A face of faith isn't always the bold hero who stands in the spotlight. Sometimes it's the ordinary believer, asked to make an extraordinary choice.

Faith is the humility to receive a hard word.

Faith is the courage to be called higher.

Faith is letting the gospel hold up a mirror to our lives — so that we don't just believe in Christ, but we live as though Christ is shaping every relationship we have.

So what about you?

What hard word might God be speaking into your life today?

May you, like Philemon, have the faith to be changed.