**THE CHURCH IN YOUR HOUSE**

Philemon 1:1-3

Hello, my name is Onesimus, and welcome to our open house. I understand you’re here because we have a church in our house and you want to learn how to have a church in your house too. Welcome! Now I must tell you that this is not my house. It belongs to Philemon. But I am part of the family. I am Philemon’s brother—well, not his brother by blood but his brother by faith. We are both children of God, followers of Jesus Christ. And actually, I work for him. I am his slave. That must sound strange to 21st century ears, but it was quite common in the first century Roman world. Of course, when you think of slavery you think of black slavery in the pre-Civil War south where abuse was often rampant and where slaves were treated as something less than human. Yes, such abuse happened in the first century too, but it was not the norm. First century slavery was not a matter of race or education or social class. And many were treated with dignity, even considered part of the household.

Philemon treated me with dignity, but I still wanted my freedom. So I stole some of his property to fund my journey, and I ran away. It’s a long way from Colossae to Rome, but a large city like Rome provided me a good place to hide and a bit of anonymity. Since runaway slaves were considered criminals, the anonymity of the city and its distance from Colossae seemed like the best way and the best place to stay free. It seemed like a good plan at the time.

But as has often been said: “If you want to make God laugh, tell him your plans.” God certainly got a chuckle out of me. Wouldn’t you know it? Here I was 1,300 miles from home and I run into a man I somewhat knew. He was a good friend of my owner, Philemon. The man’s name was Paul and he was in jail in Rome. Paul remembered me. He is not an easy man to lie to, so I told him the whole story: how I absconded with some of Philemon’s property and made a mad dash for freedom. Little did I know that it would be a different freedom than I imagined. I was not a Christ-follower at the time, and Paul led me to Jesus. I grew close to Jesus, and I grew close to Paul.

Paul told me later that I was strong enough in Christ to do a hard thing. “What is that?” I asked.

“Onesimus,” he said, “it’s time for you to go home. It’s time for you to go back to Colossae and to Philemon, own up to your crimes, and throw yourself on
Philemon’s mercy. I know him well,” Paul said. “He will do right by you.” Now Paul did, as you say, “grease the skids” a bit by writing a letter to Philemon and sending with me that letter and my new friend Tychichus to deliver it. I read the letter. Paul appealed to Philemon to receive me back not just as a slave but as a brother. He told Philemon how useful I had been to him in prison and how much more useful I could be to Philemon as a Christian. I was petrified to do this, but God gave me strength. It was the right thing to do.

You should have seen Philemon’s face when I showed up at his door. It was part shock, part mad, and part confused. I knew this letter would put him in a dilemma. If he gave me a free pass for running away, other slave-owners might make life hard for him. If he didn’t forgive me, he wouldn’t be able to live with his Christian conscience.

And since I have welcomed you into Philemon’s home today, you can see that we worked things out. You have come to see the church in Philemon’s house, so I thought I would tell you my story before the tour so you would see that we don’t play church in this house; we are church in this house. And I am as much a part of this church as is my brother and master Philemon.

Now, if you’ll step this way, I want to show you the living room. This is where we gather on the Lord’s Day to worship. Some gather at other times, of course. The door is always open to the church family. (In the first century we were never as concerned about seclusion and privacy as you 21st century people are.) But when we gather on the Lord’s Day this is where we worship. We sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs. We hear God’s word read and taught by our pastors. I get to take my turn from time to time as well. We declare the good news of what God has done for us in Christ: that our sins are forgiven, and that in Christ’s power we can share His love with the world. We pray together in this room. We pray for our city and our province. We pray for our sister churches in Ephesus and Laodicea and Smyrna and Philadelphia and others. We even pray for Rome. We give our offerings to the Lord so that we can help those in need and give missionaries resources to take the gospel to the whole world. And we celebrate the Lord’s Supper together—taking the bread and cup and remembering Jesus’ death and resurrection and the forgiveness of our sins. This is where we worship. And in worship we keep eternity before us. We are reminded that life is not about our stories but that we are swept up in God’s story—His larger story of redeeming this world in Jesus. Worship keeps the big picture before us.
We worship in the living room because worship is not just a ritual; it is a way of life, a part of life, a part of living. It shapes who we are and the way we live. It draws us close to God and empowers us to be the church outside this house in the city and in the school and in the marketplace. It encourages us to mission. If you want to have a church in your house, make space and time for worship.

**Now, please follow me to the kitchen.** See the large table there. We enjoy a lot of fellowship in the kitchen. And everyone is welcome at the table—the rich, the poor; the slave, the free; men and women and boys and girls; the lost and the saved; the married, the single; the joyful and the broken. This is where we enjoy banter and chatter about things important and trivial. It’s a place where everyone can be himself or herself. It’s comfortable. It’s welcoming. It’s warm and friendly. It’s a place where laughter reverberates and tears flow freely, where we weep with those who weep and rejoice with those who rejoice. This is a place where we can serve each other. This is where we practice our one-anothering: love one another, serve one another, forgive one another, pray for one another. I can’t tell you the number of times I’ve seen at the corner of the table two or three praying over a member in need. I’ve seen money change hands here, those with resources slipping a little to those without. I heard a small group organize to serve someone in the community who needed help. This is fellowship. And if you want to have a church in your house, make space and time for fellowship, for one-anothering.

Before we leave the kitchen, would you look over at the shelves in the corner? Yes, the shelves with the foodstuffs on them. **This is our pantry.** It’s where we keep the food we need to nourish our bodies. Perhaps you have a pantry in your house, perhaps you don’t. But we sort of let the pantry remind us that as both Deuteronomy and Jesus said, “People don’t live by bread alone but by every word that comes out of the mouth of God.” We let the pantry remind us that the Bible is so important in our home. It’s not just a book for Sunday. In my day we didn’t have individual copies. In your day, you do. Take advantage of this blessing and read God’s word every day. Read it for yourself. Read it to and with your children. Teach them to memorize verses. Encourage them to live by its teachings. And help each other hide God’s word in their lives so they may not sin against God. You may not have a pantry, but you have a Bible. And if you want to have a church in your house, keep the Bible front and center in your home.
Okay, come this way as we move on. It will be a bit crowded, but step into this room please. **This is our den.** In our day, this was a little room used mostly for quiet conversation or some alone time. Philemon and others in his family use it for what Jesus called “a prayer closet.” Your 21st century dens are different. Your dens are more or less **entertainment centers** where families watch television and kids play video games and listen to music. That creates for you a challenge we didn’t have in my day: what entertainment is appropriate when you want to make a church in your home? While so much of that is driven by the free conscience of Christians, perhaps you should ask the **same questions** we asked concerning entertainment in our day: Does it help the gospel or hinder the gospel? Does it deepen devotion to Jesus or does it put distance between Jesus and you? Would I be comfortable inviting Jesus to enjoy this entertainment with me? Jesus is in your home, you know. As someone once said, “Christ is the head of this house: the unseen guest at every meal, the silent listener to every conversation.” If you would have a church in your home, pay attention to the entertainment you allow in your home. Christ lives as much in the den as He does in any other room.

Now if you’ll step this way, I want you to notice another room—yes, the one on your right. **This is the guest room.** In his letter, Paul told Philemon to get the guest room ready for him as he hoped to visit sometime after his release from jail. The church in your house needs a guest room because church is to be a place of hospitality, a place that welcomes both the known guest and the stranger. It is a place where persons in need could find food or help with shelter, a place where friends gather to enjoy fellowship with one another. There are no signs that say, “Only Greeks and no others” or “Only Jews and no others” or “Only Christians and no others.” And much to my gratitude, there is no sign that says, “Only free persons and no slaves.” The church is to be a place of the open door and the guest room and hospitality. **Opening doors to the church and creating many guest rooms is very much a Jesus-thing.** If the temple was supposed to have been “a house of prayer for all nations,” surely the church should be a house of prayer for all people regardless of nation or race or tribe or tongue or social class or age. Yes, it gets a bit uncomfortable and even a bit messy. But hospitality is to mark the church. And if you would have a church in your house, hospitality to the known and to the stranger should be a faithful practice.

Now, moving on, come with me to our last stop in the open house, and step with me into the bedroom. **I bet you’re looking for the closet.** Well, we didn’t have such things in our day. We didn’t have the kind of wardrobe that
so many of you have in 21st century America. So we didn’t need large and spacious—what do you call them—walk-in closets? But you have them, so let me suggest that you use those closets as a reminder each morning to put on the virtues of Christ. When Thyichicus and I brought Philemon’s letter from Paul, we also brought the more general letter to the church in Colossae, the church that meets in this house. In that letter, Paul encourages us to put off anger, wrath, malice, slander, obscene talk, and lies. And if I might quote a bit of that letter, Paul told us to:

*Put on, then, as God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you; so you also must forgive. And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.*

These words mean so much to me because if Philemon had not “put on” these virtues I might very well be in jail or even executed for what I did. He was compassionate. He bore with me. He treated me with kindness. He forgave me for my sin against him. These virtues matter.

What would it look like for you to practice forgiveness in your homes, to let go of old grudges, to keep no record of wrongs, but to forgive and restore and move forward together in love? What would it look like to practice simple kindness and patience with one another in the family and letting love rule the day? I suspect there would be far less divorces, far less heartache, no more parents and children estranged from each other, and much more peace and joy, don’t you? What if when you opened your drawers and your closet each morning you put on these things as well as your shirt and your pants and your shoes? If you do this and teach your children to do this, you are having church in your house.

**But since we have no closets, look at the larger bedroom before you.** You may wonder what the bedroom has to do with a church in your house. For us, it represents the rest we find and have in the Lord. It reminds us that the Christian life is not about striving to please God or working at self-salvation projects; it is about trusting Him and resting in Him. It is about God’s grace and love for us which endures forever. While all of us seek to serve God in gratitude for His grace, at the end of the day, no matter how the day has gone, no matter our sins and our successes, we lay it all down at Jesus’ feet and we
rest secure in Him. Church, too, should be a place where people can find rest in the Lord, a harbor from the storm, a reminder of God’s grace and mercy and unconditional love for His children. Learn that. Teach your children that. Practice that in your home. And you will have a church in your house.

So there you have it—a little tour of the church in Philemon’s house, in my house. Any questions? Yes, I see your hand. Do you have a question?

No, not a question, but a testimony of what church looked like in my house as I was growing up. Is that okay?

By all means.

Thank you. I’ll be brief.

My parents did not wear their religion on their sleeves; they wove it into the fabric of their everyday garments. They told me the stories of Jesus, they read to me from the Bible, and they prayed with me, but none of this jutted out from the rest of life’s terrain. God talk was all bound up with homework talk, cut-the-grass talk, Cub scout talk, and supper table talk. They probably didn’t know it, but they were good lay theologians, theologians of the reality of God in the ordinary events of life, teaching me that the gifts of everyday life are the means of grace.¹

And that’s how my parents helped make a church in our house—a church I could take with me into the world, a church I could try to make in my own house with my own family when I became a man. I’ll forever be grateful for the church in my house.

Thank you, my friend. Church won’t always look the same in every house, but it can be in every house. And I call on you across these many centuries to just imagine what it might look like not so much to have a church in your house but to be the church in your house, among your family. Jesus dwells in your house already. Join Him to make church there too.
