

Humanity is a wildly gregarious species. We group together in cliques, in groups, and in communities. We have friend circles online, we work in teams. We sing in duets, trios, quartets, and choirs. We band together, pool together, assemble together, and gather together. You can see this in the language we use. It seems like every individual action has a community counterpart. Gather enough fans, and you get a rally. Assemble enough students, and you have a convocation. Gather enough hobbyists, and you have a convention. Gather enough musicians, and you have a band. Commuters become a carpool, and a carpool lane. Students become classes, which assemble in a conversation. If they study together long enough, they're a cohort. Even one of the most independent things we do in this country has a group synonym; assemble enough voters together, and you have a caucus. Humans are a grouping species.

All this relational language tells us something about our species: we need other people. There it is. Like it or not, we were built to exist in community.

One recent study revealed that a relative lack of social ties is associated with depression and later-life cognitive decline, as well as with increased mortality. One study, which examined data from more than 309,000 people, found that lack of strong relationships increased the risk of premature death from all causes by 50% — an effect on mortality risk roughly comparable to smoking up to 15 cigarettes a day, and greater than obesity and physical inactivity.

This is part of God's design from the very beginning:

- *Man was made by community. Then God said, "Let us make man in our image." God, in His triune nature, exists eternally as a community of love. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit have always known perfect love and unity with one another. In this divine fellowship, we find the origins of our own need for community. God didn't create us because He needed us; He created us because His love overflows. In our very essence, we are a reflection of this divine community.*
- *Man was made in community. There, in the freshly minted dirt, God fashioned the man with His own hands. Everything else He created by the vibration of His voice, but man He touched. Then He bent down, put His face to the face of humanity, and exhaled life. This tells us something about the type of relationship He intended to have with this part of His creation. God's hands-on approach in creation reflects His desire for intimacy and closeness with us.*
- *Man was made for community. When God made the first man, He built him with a design deficiency. Then He announced, "It is not good for man to be alone." God wanted Adam to feel his need for another person. This design points to our relational nature — we are created for connection, for love, for the richness that comes from walking life together. Our need for others is woven into the very fabric of our being.*

We are not only made by a community of divine persons, but also shaped and refined by our interactions with others. God designed us to grow in relationships, and it is through these connections that we become more like Him. Proverbs 27:17 says, "As iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another." Our rough edges are smoothed out in the friction of relationships. We become more patient, more forgiving, more humble when we engage with those around us.

This is exactly why Paul begins his letter to Philemon by drawing Philemon's attention to the community of faith. Read verses 1 through 7 again. Note all the names mentioned at the beginning of Paul's letter. It is not uncommon to mention numerous individuals during a salutation in a Greek letter, but there is something different in this letter from all others. Notice how many times the word "our" is referenced to describe who these people were to Paul and Philemon. Why did Paul reference these shared relationships?

If the Bible is to be believed, we were made by, in, and for community. This tells us something important about our nature. We were built for community. But I know what most of us will be thinking at this point: "Fine, relationships are important, but that doesn't necessarily mean that I'm required to have a relationship with difficult people."

Actually, that is exactly what it means.

Premarital counseling is one of my favorite things to do as a pastor (post-marital counseling, not so much). Here is the truth: young love is oblivious. The swirl of emotions that accompany new relationships makes people, well, ignorant of the reality of what they are doing. Love makes individuals blind to one important fact: people are universally terrible. Humans are, at our core, broken and wildly selfish — present company included. Marriage, then, unites a person to a broken and wildly selfish individual. And the moment you unite yourself to another broken and wildly selfish individual, you are opening yourself up not just to the possibility of being hurt, but to the absolute certainty of it. This is true for spouses, coworkers, teammates, neighbors, or any other name given to our relationships. So you may not be blinded by love. But if you think that the relationships in your life won't eventually be difficult, you are just as oblivious.

Onesimus was a servant in Philemon's household. Servants were laborers who were contractually obligated to serve for a period of time, usually lasting years or decades. Onesimus, at some point, had tired of this arrangement and fled to Rome. While there, he encountered the Apostle Paul and became a Christian. Now he was part of the faith community. And to make things right, he had returned to Philemon. What would Philemon do? He could have Onesimus punished or imprisoned. At the very least, Philemon could hold this violation over Onesimus's head. Paul is asking him to do something radical: to forgive and to restore.

They don't always feel like it, but relationships are a gift. And like all gifts, they must be

nurtured, cared for, and, at times, repaired. This means we don't treat people like adversaries in a contest. We treat them like teammates. Our objective is not to win an argument, but to restore the relationship — what Jesus called “gaining a brother.”

*“If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault in private; if he listens to you, you have gained your brother” (Matthew 18:15).*

This is exactly what Paul is trying to do by taking such a delicate approach when addressing Philemon. He could have demanded that Philemon do what is right, but instead, he begins by expressing how much Philemon meant to Paul and his ministry.

*“I thank my God always when I remember you in my prayers, because I hear of your love and of the faith that you have toward the Lord Jesus and for all the saints...” (Philemon 4–5).*

Paul is expressing his appreciation for the way Philemon has shown love and faith to Jesus and to others. This is more than just a statement of gratitude. Embedded in his statement is a subtle appeal to a very important biblical command. In fact, if Jesus is to be believed, it is an appeal to all of them.

*“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets” (Matthew 22:37-40).*

These two commands are bound together in the plan of God:

- *Matthew 6:14-15: “For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.”* 1
- *John 4:20: “If someone says, ‘I love God,’ and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, how can he love God whom he has not seen?”*
- *Matthew 5:23-24: “Therefore, if you bring your gift to the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar, and go your way. First, be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.”* E
- *phesians 4:32: “And be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God in Christ forgave you.”*

## Part I: “We” over “Me”

a study of Philemon

# RUNAWAY grace

God's Plan for Broken Relationships



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