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FOREWORD BY JOHN MARK COMER



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STICKING TOGETHER IN
AN AGE OF UNFRIENDING



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WHY FRIENDSHIPS ARE SO HARD

We would be hard-pressed to find a more misquoted statement in history than the one attributed to the writer G. K. Chesterton. In response to a newspaper's question, "What is the problem with the world?" he tersely quipped, "I am." While this story is factually untrue, the point is completely biblical. Human experience, world history, and theology supply ample evidence for this apocryphal tale. But what is even more uncomfortable and seldom discussed is the link between the self and society, as this story suggests that the problem of the individual never remains with the individual but has an uncanny habit of contaminating those around them.

Whatever word we choose for what ails humanity—sin, dysfunction, immorality, issues—we must investigate how it impacts those around us. Until we get a grasp on the

contagion of sin, we have no hope of friendship that endures the arc of time.

Sin is the decision to act independently of God. Nothing more, nothing less. I'm not sure where you are as it stands regarding God or sin, but if a person does not believe in the two, they are sitting on the defense stand, not God.

In the Garden of Eden, God makes one prohibition: to refrain from eating of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Sometime later, Satan entices Eve to eat. She then turns to her husband, who eats as well. Their decision to act independently of God had profound relational and societal consequences. Previously described as being naked and unashamed, Adam and Eve were completely vulnerable, transparent, and authentic with each other. Sexual intercourse between a husband and wife is designed to be in the framework of a committed friendship where a treaty or covenant is made. Every time a husband and a wife engage in sexual intimacy, they are saying their own version of "I see the best and worst in you, and I accept you as is."

But notice Adam and Eve's first move after they sin: they find fig leaves and hide from each other. Intimacy, transparency, and authenticity are gone. What's more, they used to walk with God daily, experiencing a soul-level harmony that defies imagination. But when they decide to act independently of God, he has to come looking for them. And when they hear God walking, they

hide. Their sin was not just personal. It tore at the fabric of their relationship with each other as husband and wife and their friendship with God.

Sin now becomes a part of humanity's genetic code. David acknowledges he was born in sin. Paul says sin entered the world through Adam and has infected everyone, even creation. And if anyone does not believe our natural disposition is one of inherited sin, they must not have children. Why is it children never need to take a class on how to lie or be selfish with their toys? Why, when I was once engaged in an important business dinner, did my young son—driven solely by his desire to be done with it all, with no thought for anyone but himself—demand at the top of his lungs it was time to go? Sin is just the way things are. We come into this world at a net negative.

Sin is also the problem with every relationship. Sin is why Adam and Eve's son, Cain, killed his brother, Abel. Sin is the reason Jacob and Esau were estranged for decades, as Jacob had swindled his own brother out of his birthright and was forced to flee his home. Sin ripped apart Joseph and his brothers. Sin is why Solomon viewed women as mere tools for his sexual satisfaction. Sin is why I cursed at my groomsman on the golf course, effectively ending the friendship. Sin is why my other groomsman was abusive to his wife, wrecking their intimacy and oneness. And sin is the reason for every divorce. Yes, we may call it adultery or irreconcilable

differences, with the former a synonym for sin and the latter a fancy term for selfishness on the part of one or both parties. Why is friendship so hard? Because of sin's pervasive nature. Sin is never just about the individual; it is also deeply relational.

Renowned scientist Albert Einstein once wrote an ultimatum to his first wife, Mileva Maric. Ever the scientist, Einstein stated without a hint of kindness or compassion that she would make sure

that my clothes and laundry are kept in good order; that I will receive my three meals regularly in my room; that my bedroom and study are kept neat, and especially that my desk is left for my use only. You will renounce all personal relations with me insofar as they are not completely necessary for social reasons. Specifically, you will forego my sitting at home with you; my going out or traveling with you. You will obey the following points in your relations with me: You will not expect any intimacy from me, nor will you reproach me in any way. You will stop talking to me if I request it. You will leave my bedroom or study immediately without protest if I request it.¹

The relationship did not last. How could it when Einstein could not get outside of himself? Friendship will never endure when one party turns inward.

MEETING PHILEMON

There's a tiny book in the Bible the length of a short blog post. For years I saw no relevance in the book other than the way it irritated me as a black man. At the epicenter is a very understandable breach in the relationship between a slave owner named Philemon and his estranged "property," Onesimus. In the genesis of America, this book was used to perpetuate slavery and keep blacks in their place. If ever there was an appropriate use of the phrase "spiritual abuse," the way this text was wielded in the antebellum South is a perfect example. The great Howard Thurman, who was a mentor of sorts to Martin Luther King Jr., speaks of how his grandmother, a former slave, refused to read the book of Philemon because she found Paul way too complacent regarding the institution of slavery.

I share his grandmother's concern in wanting Paul to be far more vociferous in his denunciations of slavery. If I could, I'd scream at Paul to have him scream at Philemon, "We don't own people!" But Paul is loud in a different way. What he offers is the most potent vaccine to destroy the institution of slavery, something the people of South Africa have tried that we in America have not: friendship. Yes, the book of Philemon, this tiny blog post of a book, offers not only a visual of friendship but a roadmap of how we can experience friendship that will span the arc of time.

It's clear that this book is about friendship through Paul's appeal to Philemon: "For this perhaps is why he

was parted from you for a while, that you might have him back forever, no longer as a bondservant but more than a bondservant, as a beloved brother—especially to me, but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord. So if you consider me your partner, *receive* him as you would *receive* me” (Philemon 15-17, emphasis mine). These words must have taken Philemon’s breath away. In the original Greek, the word *receive* is a term of hospitality most often used when people ate together. In both Greek and Jewish culture of the time, people ate only with their social equals. This is why Jesus was always critiqued by the religious elite for eating with sinners and tax collectors. And now Paul is calling Philemon to transition from a utilitarian relationship of power to a brotherhood of friendship where he and Onesimus would be seated side by side as equals.

Before we write off Philemon as an enslaver of people, we would do well to pause and look for ourselves in this letter. Philemon’s only interaction with Onesimus was from a top-down trajectory in which he wielded all the power. Onesimus simply had no recourse but to either do as instructed or take off. Their relationship is best defined by control, which continues to be a major subplot in human dynamics today, even in a post-slavery world.

There are plenty of Philemons today who would never remain in a relationship unless they held the keys. I once spent time with a very accomplished man named Chris

who had built a successful business with hundreds of employees and was sought after by companies all over the world. He was also very lonely, a confession he made once over lunch. Chris couldn't understand this loneliness because, in his mind, he had friends. And in a way that made me squirm, he wanted to know why I had not reciprocated his overtures of friendship toward me.

I could have said something like, "Oh, Chris, you have friends. People love you. Stop being so hard on yourself." But I knew this was a lie. Instead, I gathered all my courage and said, "You're a very smart man, so I don't think what you will hear from me is new. We all have weaknesses, and yours is power. You use it to keep people in need of you. I've seen your gestures of friendship toward me, and I appreciate them. My struggle is that friendship is all about vulnerability, and it's impossible to be vulnerable with someone whose drug of choice is power, because they will leverage your weaknesses to their benefit while never sharing theirs." Sadly, Chris is still lonely because of his commitment to hold on to power at all costs.

This is exactly Philemon's problem. Onesimus, a common name that was given to slaves, means "useful." To Philemon, Paul says of Onesimus, "Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful to you and to me" (Philemon 11). Paul gently calls out Philemon's utilitarian, power-centered disposition toward Onesimus. Theirs was not a friendship. Philemon was in control. He

held all the cards, and as long as Onesimus produced, thereby proving his worth and usefulness, the relationship went well. But the moment Onesimus proved uncontrollable, he was deemed useless. This is why Roman law stipulated that a slave who ran away and was caught could be executed by crucifixion.

Look around and you will see a world dominated by Philemons—people who do not know how to travel the terrain of human relationships without being in control. One of the most difficult seasons of parenthood is when children become young adults. As a father of adult children, I can tell you the reason for the difficulty is we no longer have control, and if we try to clamp down and tighten the grip, we will have no relationship. My attempts at the role of Philemon have never ended well.

I could go on about shattered relationships due to an in-law's failed attempts at control because they did not approve of their child's choice of a partner. Or the overly sensitive spouse who, every time you broach a potentially combative subject, shuts down and weaponizes their tears. These are examples of veiled Philemons, who at their core cannot function without being in control.

You know you are in a relationship with a Philemon when they have a distorted view of loyalty. Should loyalty be a virtue in an authentic friendship? For sure. But the question is, loyalty to what? A real friend is loyal to their friend's well-being. This virtuous loyalty leads

them to have hard conversations and tell them things they may not want to hear. This kind of loyalty refuses to lie to or for them. This is a good kind of loyalty—not the kind the power-hungry Philemons of the world want. They're after a narcissistic loyalty that has clearly defined boundaries. If you cross these boundaries you are canceled, and they will exercise their right to crucify the relationship.

One of the most painful moments in life is when you realize you're in a friendship with a Philemon. I was jarred by this revelation some time ago. Jason and I had a wonderful friendship where we talked almost every day. Our conversations ranged from sports to matters of the soul. When Jason asked me to help him, I did . . . most of the time. The first time I couldn't help him, he cut off communication for a month. When we finally talked, I called him out on his behavior. Jason agreed this was a problem for him. But sure enough, the same scenario played out a year later, and that time I refused to play along. I had come to see this very successful man was used to people orbiting around him. And when Jason didn't get his way, he removed them from his life.

There are two extremes when it comes to loneliness. On one side is Philemon, the person who has not fully grasped both the hurt they inflict on others and the reason why friendship is so elusive for them. On the other is Onesimus, the person who has absorbed the blunt force trauma of

the hurt and knows for certain why friendship is so hard. The undercurrent to either extreme is sin.

MEETING ONESIMUS

While it's impossible to have true friendship with the Philemons of the world, it's just as arduous to venture into relationship with Onesimus. He has been hurt too much to lay himself bare in friendship.

I roll my eyes when scholars debate why Onesimus fled Philemon's home. The simple answer is Onesimus knew what all of us know: we were not created to be owned by another human. It is possible Philemon acted in some way to expedite Onesimus's plans, maybe through a harsh word or lashing out at him physically. But at some point Onesimus said his own version of "enough is enough" and took off unannounced. I imagine Philemon returning from some trip and calling for Onesimus with no response. Maybe Philemon asks his wife and son if they've seen Onesimus and they shake their heads. Days later it hits him—Onesimus is gone and never will return. Their distorted relationship is over.

We can take only so much until our hurt triggers the classic fight or flight mechanism. Onesimus chose flight. There are many people in our world who relate with Onesimus.

Much of pastoral ministry is focused on sorting out people's problems with others. Over time, I've heard the

familiar refrain of people who no longer want to deal with drama. Women have sat in my office exhausted over some failed interaction with another woman, saying, “See, I just can’t be friends with women; they’re too much trouble.” While I haven’t heard a man articulate a similar kind of exhaustion, the fatigue is evident. My pastoral experiences bear witness with modern social science. In a recent survey from the Survey Center on American Life, less than half of men and four out of ten women reported being satisfied with their friendships.² The problem is relationships *are* drama, and I don’t mean this in a negative way. Whose life is not made up of mountaintops and deep valleys? Add to this the sin we all bring into our relationships, and we have what every good movie or book has—conflict. If we are not up for the drama, we are not ready for friendship.

The woman who announces she is finished with female relationships speaks out of a well of hurt. Something has happened to her, and also to the man who never makes an effort to maintain friendships. Their inner Onesimus is speaking.

There are people on the dating scene who just can’t seem to sustain a relationship because at some point they sabotage themselves and cut things off. There is hurt beneath the surface in many of these cases, likely attributed to some event where the person gave themselves in vulnerability only to have their heart broken. While they long

for communion with others, their pain prevents them from getting too far. Over and over again, Onesimus lifts his head and points to the exit. If we are honest with ourselves, unresolved hurt wounds more of us than we'd like to admit.

Though we have been hurt, our response to the pain makes all the difference. Paul understood this, which is why he gives what many people of color perceive as the most awful instructions ever. Paul tells Onesimus he has to go back to Philemon (Philemon 12). Paul is after a new relationship between Philemon and Onesimus, one in which the old power dynamics are dismantled for equality to emerge. But Paul understands there is no possibility for this kind of brotherhood unless Onesimus takes the long road back to Colossae, faces the one who wronged him, and deals with the hurt.

We live in a culture where those who have been hurt are deified and the oppressor vilified. It goes without saying that we need to defend and advocate on behalf of those who have been abused, pushed to the margins, and wronged. However, we cannot become so fixated on Philemon that we neglect to focus on Onesimus. Yes, it's impossible to have a friendship with someone who hurts others, but it's also impossible to be friends with someone who has formed an identity around their hurt instead of dealing with it. The lead actor in the drama of our culture is no longer Philemon but Onesimus.

This is where Paul's letter to Philemon presents us with a challenge. Imagine taking this letter to various movie studios in the hopes it gets turned into a film. The problem that studio executives will have is there is no clear villain. Sure, Philemon is fraught with problems—he is a slaveowner, after all—but Onesimus doesn't have clean hands, either. Read just about any scholar, and they will tell you that when Onesimus decides to leave, he faces a dilemma any slave faces: How will he fund his flight? How will he eat? What will he do about travel and lodging expenses? It's a cold world out there, and Onesimus is ill suited to thrive in Roman society as a free person. So Onesimus does what most slaves would do—he steals from Philemon. Paul alludes to this when he says, "If he has wronged you at all, or owes you anything, charge that to my account" (Philemon 18). In the drama of their relationship, there is mutual culpability. Please don't hear this as "equal culpability," as if owning a person is on par with stealing possessions. Rather, "mutual culpability" is an admission that both have stolen from each other. Philemon has stolen Onesimus's freedom, and Onesimus has stolen Philemon's possessions.

This is what sin does and why friendship is so hard. Sin makes thieves of us all because the epicenter of sin is self. All of us are obsessed with our own gratification, and we will not stop until we are satisfied. Some men never make it to the marriage altar to know the joys of friendship with

a wife because they are obsessed with taking from a woman's body to satisfy themselves. Others will never know the kind of friendship that covers the arc of "I will" to "I did" because they put others down to elevate themselves through gossip or slander. Some are like one man I know who always cozies up to the "cool kids." The moment he finds someone "cooler," he leaves to join the new group. This is a form of stealing by which people take from others' success to build their own image. And then there is the opposite dilemma, where people surround themselves with friends who share their same station in life, whether they have been hurt like them or are experiencing the same economic struggle. We understand friendship often begins on a note of affinity. The problem, however, is that when one friend begins to do better and emerges into a new stratum of well-being or success, the other person crucifies the friendship, no longer able to steal from their failure to feel good about themselves.

You may wonder if there is any hope for Philemon and Onesimus to be friends. How in the world will the two thieves sit at the table of friendship? This then leads us to ask questions of our own relationships. Is there any hope in a world marred by sin, which tears at the fabric of human relations, for deep, abiding friendship?

What follows are some of the most brilliant instructions on how Philemon and Onesimus can pivot from a master-slave relationship to one of brotherhood and

friendship. Simply put, the letter to Philemon unlocks the door and shows the way to enduring friendship. If we heed Paul's instructions, we will know the joys of sustained friendship and experience a kind of meaning that no paycheck or position can ever satisfy.

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