Our lesson will concentrate on Philippians 2:5–15, Colossians 3:1–17, and Philemon. The last of these is particularly interesting because it is so short and, at least at first glance, appears to have no gospel content.

**Philippians**

**Verse 5:** The word *you* is plural rather than singular. Does this mean “each of you should have the mind that Christ had,” or does it mean “as a church you should have the mind that he had”?

In either case, what does it mean to have the same mind or attitude that Christ had?

**Verses 6–11:** This is another instance where many scholars believe that Paul is quoting from an early Christian hymn. Here are the verses arranged as part of a hymn. Of course, the rhythm of the original doesn’t come through in translation:

6 Who, being in the form of God,  
thought it not robbery  
to be equal with God:

7 But made himself of no reputation,  
and took upon him the form of a servant,  
and was made in the likeness of men:
8 And being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, [even the death of the cross.]

9 Wherefore God also hath highly exalted him, and given him a name which is above every name:

10 That at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth;

11 And that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

To understand the hymn better, try writing it in your own words using modern English or look at a modern translation of these verses.

**Verses 6–8:** The Greek word used for *form* (verse 6) is only used to refer to outward appearance, not to refer to things such as a mind. In what sense was Christ in the form of God before his incarnation?

“Thought it not robbery” is an odd translation. Literally the verse says that, having the form of the Father, Jesus “thought it not something to be clutched at [or “clung to”].” In other words, he was equal to God, but he didn’t cling to that equality. What does Paul have in mind here? What would it have meant for Christ to have clung to his equality with God?
The beginning of verse 7 is also translated oddly: “emptied himself” is the literal meaning. Of what did Christ empty himself by becoming a human being?

The phrases “took upon him the form of a servant [literally “a slave”]” and “was made in the likeness of men” are parallel. Hebrew poetry uses parallelism to show that two things are the same. (Though the hymn was written in Greek, the heavy Jewish influence in the early Church resulted in many Hebraisms, such as this, in early hymns.) What do these two phrases tell us about human beings, and why is that important for us to know?

For Christ, why was taking death on himself humbling himself (verse 8)? Assuming that Paul inserted the last line of verse 8 into the hymn as he used it for his letter, why do you think he added it? Why does the line begin with even?

Verse 5 told us that we should have the same mind or attitude as did Christ. Then verses 6–8 describe that mind. How do these verses about Christ tell us how we should live our lives?

Do we have the form of God? Are there any ways in which we cling to that form?

What would it mean for us to empty ourselves in imitation of the Savior?

Do we understand that to be a human being is to be a servant of God? If so, how do we show that understanding?

What does Jesus’s death on the cross teach us about our own lives? Does it teach us anything about what genuine humility requires?
**Verses 9–11:** The word *wherefore* (verse 9) is the same as the modern word *therefore*. It tells us that what came before explains what follows. So what is the hymn saying about how verses 6–8 explain verses 9–11?

Verse 8 spoke of the Savior’s humiliation. How is that related to his exaltation?

What does it mean to say that Jesus’s name is above every other name?

What is the significance of bowing the knee (verse 10)? Is there anything in particular about bowing or knees that gives this act significance?

What does the phrase “of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth” refer to?

The word translated *profess* in verse 11 can also be translated *acknowledge* or *consent*. How might each of these translations help us understand what this hymn says?

What does the word *lord* mean? What does it mean to acknowledge that Jesus is Lord? How do we acknowledge that?

“To the glory of the Father” tells us why every knee will bow to Christ and every tongue will confess him. So what does it mean that they will do those things to the Father’s glory?

**Verses 12–13:** We could paraphrase what Paul says in verse 12 this way: “So, since you have always obeyed, whether I was there or not, work out your salvation in fear and trembling.” What do the parts of this sentence have to do with each other? In particular, why does he say “since you have obeyed, work our your salvation”? 

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Paul is going to use the contents of the hymn to preach obedience. What in the hymn gives him the material he needs to do that?

“Fear and trembling” is an Old Testament phrase. (For example, see Exodus 15:16, Isaiah 19:16, and Psalm 2:11.) Does this phrase mean that we should dread God’s presence? That we should be afraid that he will treat us unjustly, change his plan, or go back on his promises? As we work out our salvation, what should we fear?

The Greek word translated *work out* could also be translated *accomplish* or *move in the direction of*. Do those alternative translations give you any ideas about what Paul might mean?

What does it mean to say that God is at work in us (verse 13)? Do you think that in the phrase “it is God which worketh in you” the word *you* means “you individuals” or “you, the Church”?

Note that the Greek word translated *good pleasure* means “a state of being kindly disposed” or “contentment.” Does that shed any light on the meaning of verse 13?

**Verses 14–15:** What does verse 14 mean about how we should act? Verse 15 tells us *why* we should act that way. How does doing what we do without grumbling make us blameless and harmless (*sincere* may be a better translation)?

Paul makes “sons of God” parallel to “blameless and harmless.” Why?

Does the beginning of verse 15 have anything to do with having the same attitude or mind in us that Christ had?
Without blemish is a better translation than without rebuke. Paul seems to be explicitly comparing us to Christ. What permits that comparison? What does it mean for us to be lights or lamps in the world?

Colossians 3

Verses 1–4: Verse 1 continues the line of thinking that Paul began in Colossians 2:20: “Since you have died with Christ as to the spirits that control the world, why are you subject to their rules as if you lived in the world?”

What does it mean to “be risen with Christ”? Is that only a metaphor, or is there also something literal about its meaning? If there is, what is it?

“Seek upward” might be a good translation to replace “seek the things which are above” (verse 1). What contrast with Colossians 2:20 is intended here?

Is it significant that Paul doesn’t contrast the rules of the world with the rules of heaven, but the rules of the world with Christ, who sits on the right hand of God?

In verse 2 mind or attention or, perhaps best, intentions is a better translation than affections. If our intentions or attention is on “the above,” what will determine our interests? How is what Paul says here related to what he said in Philippians 2:5? Can you say anything about what that might mean in practical terms?

Verse 3 tells Paul’s readers that they are dead. What does he mean?
What does it mean to say that the lives of the Saints are “hid with Christ in God”? From whom are their lives hidden? How are they hidden?

When will Christ be revealed (verse 4)? Why won’t our lives be revealed until then?

**Verses 5–11:** Another translation of the first part of verse 5: “So put to death that in you which is of the earth.” Why are the sins that follow that admonition “of the earth”? Is everything that is “of the earth” sinful? What about eating a ripe peach, for example? If Paul is not saying that everything of the earth is sinful, how should we understand his use of that phrase?

Why are these sins idolatry (verse 5)? Is all sin idolatry? Is there something about these sins in particular that makes the label of idolatry appropriate? Explain.

What reason do verses 5 and 10 give for why we should not sin?

Look at Paul’s command in Romans 13:14 and compare Galatians 3:27 with verse 10. What do those verses suggest Paul means by “the new man”?

How might we go about putting on Christ, as if we were putting on clothing? In verse 8 he has spoken of putting off the old man with the same metaphor? What is the significance of that metaphor? When does a Christian put on Christ? What language do we use that means the same?

The Greek of verse 10 says only “put on the new.” If you were making the translation of the Greek, what other word might you insert after *new* to make sense of the clause? Obviously
*person* would work, but what about *life*? Does that capture Paul’s meaning, or does it change it? Are there other words that we could insert?

To what does *where* refer in verse 11? What location has Paul mentioned recently? If he hasn’t mentioned one, why does he use a relative pronoun denoting space?

Does what Paul says in verse 11 mean that all cultural differences between Greeks, Jews, Scythians, and others have disappeared? If not, in what sense is there no difference between them? What does Paul’s teaching suggest about contemporary life in the Church?

Why is there no distinction between Greek and Jew and so on (verse 11)? What has Paul taught that explains the impossibility of making such distinctions?

*Bond* means “slave” (verse 11). In Paul’s world, a slave was not a person but a piece of property. Owners were expected to treat them humanely—to take good care of their property—but there was no penalty for not doing so. What does it mean for Paul to include this difference, “bond nor free,” among the differences that he says do not exist for the Christian? Does it suggest anything for our own times, or is it merely an artifact from the ancient world?

**Verses 12–15:** Why are Christians described as “the elect of God”? What does it mean to be elect or chosen?

What does it mean to forebear one another? When do we find ourselves doing that? When do we fail to live up to this requirement? Can you think of times when you’ve not for-
borne someone whom you ought to have? What made that
difficult, and why was it necessary?

Does verse 14 add an additional virtue, charity, or does it sum up the virtues required in verses 12–13? If it sums them up, can we use verses 12–13 as a kind of provisional definition of charity?

The word translated *bond* in verse 14 means “fastener” or “clasp” and is used to denote a bond that creates unity. What is the bond of perfection or, in other words, completeness?

**Verses 15–17:** How does the peace of God differ from other kinds of peace (verse 15)? What does it mean to have peace rule in one’s heart? If peace doesn’t rule, what rules in its place? Compare 2 Thessalonians 3:16 and Ephesians 2:14.

What does it mean to say that we are “called in one body” to the peace of God?

For what is it that Paul wants us to be thankful? Is this a general admonition, “Be thankful,” or is he saying, “Be thankful that you are called to the peace of God”?

If we are grateful for having been given the gospel and being members of Christ’s Church, how do we express that gratitude?

In verse 16, does “word of Christ” mean “the word which proclaims Christ” or “the word that Christ speaks”?

What does Paul mean by *wisdom*? Is Colossians 1:28 relevant to answering that question?

How does the word of Christ dwell in us? What does that metaphor, of a word dwelling in persons, mean? Can you
think of synonyms for the word *dwell* that might help you think about Paul’s meaning here?

Here is an alternative translation of verse 16: “Let the word of Christ dwell richly in you, teaching and admonishing one another with all wisdom by means of psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, singing with thankfulness to God in your hearts.” How does that mean differently than does the King James Version?

The last phrase of verse 16 can be translated in several ways. One is in the alternative translation above. But the King James Version is quite reasonable in contemporary English—“singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord.” What does that mean?

Who is to do the teaching in the congregation? What makes that teaching possible?

How do we teach wisdom with music? When do we do so? Is this something we might be lax in doing?

Can you say, in practical terms, what it means to “do all in the name of the Lord Jesus” (verse 17)?

**Philemon**

This letter is 335 words in Greek. It was probably written early in Paul’s imprisonment in Rome. Since it is so infrequently read or discussed, I will provide some commentary on it in addition to questions.

Why is this book part of the scriptural canon? A man named Onesimus was later made bishop of Ephesus. Might that be
relevant? If this is the Onesimus of the book of Philemon, what does it tell us about Onesimus’s life?

Why does Paul include Timothy’s name on the letter?

What does it suggest that Paul calls Philemon a “fellow labourer” (verse 1)? A modern translation might be *coworker*.

Apphia is a woman’s name. Most assume she is Philemon’s wife. We don’t know who Archippus was, but he might have been Philemon’s son. Otherwise it would be odd to include him in a personal letter like this. What does Paul’s description of Archippus as his “fellowsoldier” (verse 2) suggest?

What do verses 4–7 tell us about Philemon? The Greek word *pistis*, translated *faith* in verse 5, could also be translated *faithfulness* or *reliability*.

Many have interpreted verse 5 and the first part of verse 6 as a chiasmus. Can you see the chiastic structure that some impute to this verse? Does that structure reveal anything about how we should read the verse, or is it simply how the clauses are organized?

Verse 6 is notoriously difficult to translate since it is equally difficult to understand its meaning in Greek. How might you “translate” or paraphrase the verse into ordinary contemporary English?

Everything up through verse 7 has been introductory. The body of the letter begins in verse 8. Why do you think Paul has such long introductions to many of his letters, even a short one like this?

What does it mean to say that Paul has enough confidence or boldness to order Philemon to do what he wants (verse
8)? Does Paul remind Philemon of his confidence, boldness, and authority in order to intimidate him to do what Paul wants him to? Does verse 14 help answer this question? What does it mean to say that Paul appeals to Philemon “for love’s sake” (verse 9)? Paul has already mentioned love twice. Is that relevant to understanding how and why he refers to it here?

In verse 9 the King James Version translates the word *presbytēs* as *the aged*, but the word can also mean “the ambassador” (just as *elder* can mean both “an old person” and “one holding a particular priesthood office”). Which translation do you think makes the most sense in context?

Onesimus has been converted by Paul (verse 10). Why does Paul call Onesimus his child?

In verse 11 the Greek words for *useful* (*profitable* in the King James Version) and for *useless* (*unprofitable* in the King James Version) are a pun. Paul may also be playing on Onesimus’s name since most translators understand it to be another word for *useful*. It was a common name for slaves. Is there a point to that play on words?

Paul assumes that Philemon himself would have been willing to do the work for Paul that Onesimus is doing (verse 13). What does that tell us about the kind of work Onesimus is probably performing? What does it say about the kind of relationship that Paul and Philemon have?

Onesimus is a runaway slave; Philemon is his master, a Christian. Onesimus offended Philemon in some way and then ran away. Based on verse 18, we usually assume that Onesimus stole Philemon’s money. But what he owes Philemon's...
lemon (which Paul says he will repay) may be merely the work he should have done. We cannot be sure what the original offense was.

Paul wanted to keep Onesimus as his slave (verse 13), but it would have been illegal for him to keep him—as well as a breach of his friendship with Philemon. The law required someone who had given a runaway slave refuge either to return the slave to his or her master or to sell the slave in the market and give the master the money earned from that sale. However, Deuteronomic law, which Paul knew well, forbade returning a runaway slave (Deuteronomy 23:15–16). Is that contradiction a problem for Paul? Why or why not?

Paul has great affection for Onesimus: “my very heart” or, in the very literal King James Version, “mine own bowels” (verse 12), and Onesimus has been helping him (verse 11). What reason does Paul give for returning Onesimus (verse 14)? The Greek word that the King James Version translates benefit (agathos) is probably better translated good or favor: “that the favor you give would not, in effect, be by compulsion, but by your willingness.” Does that change the meaning of the verse?

How is the explanation of verses 15–16 related to what Paul says in verse 14?

Paul says he has a request of Philemon in verse 10. He makes his request—receive the slave as he would receive Paul, that is, as a beloved brother—considerably later than he first mentions it (verse 17). Why does he wait?

Paul does not command Philemon (verse 14). He doesn’t ask that Onesimus be freed, but that he be treated as a
brother, both as a brother in the flesh and as one in the Lord (verse 16). What would it mean for a person to remain a slave but to be treated as a brother or sister?

Why doesn’t Paul ask Philemon to free Onesimus?

Why does Paul make the offer to pay Philemon if Onesimus owes him money (verses 18–19)?

Verse 20 puns on Onesimus’s name: the Greek word translated benefit is oninēmi, the root of Onesimus’s name. Paul isn’t making a joke, so why do you think he makes that play on words?

Paul says he knows that Philemon will obey the will of God and will do even more than Paul has suggested (verse 21). Why does Paul speak of obedience here when he has been speaking of willingness in response to love before? Is this “even more” the thing that Paul wished for in the first place, that Onesimus might remain with him as his servant? Or is it that Philemon will free Onesimus on his return?

Has Paul asserted his apostolic authority over Philemon indirectly even if not directly?

Do you think Philemon acceded to Paul’s request?

What does this letter teach us about relationships between Christians who have civil or social authority over one another, for example, teachers and students or bosses and employees?