



Giants AND *Upside down* JUSTICE

Pip Miner, NSW/ACT State Office team member and former cross-cultural worker in Cambodia, draws contextual mission principles from Philemon.

How can Jesus radically change the life of a slave, a slave owner and the message of a Christian leader who appeals for upside-down justice? What implications might this message have for those of us who contend with the reality of having 'giant's strength' but know it is 'tyrannous to use it like a giant'?

In the short letter of Philemon, we see how the cosmic principle of Jesus' turning power dynamics upside-down is outworked in a single household.

A quick plot-review: A slave named Onesimus had escaped his owner, Philemon. He ran from Colossae to Rome - a city where he could more easily disappear into the crowd. In Rome, Onesimus met Paul and became a follower of Jesus. Now, Paul sends him back to Colossae... and to Philemon.

In the letter of Philemon, Paul recognises power dynamics as they stand, as well as how they have been transformed in Christ. He appeals to his 'precious friend' and 'fellow worker' Philemon.

Paul does not use his authority as an apostle to demand justice, instead using phrases such as 'old man' and 'prisoner' to refer to himself! Onesimus isn't a 'slave' but a 'brother in Christ' and a 'son'. With tenderness, Paul says that Onesimus has become his 'very heart'. Paul uses his power to pen a humble, moving letter advocating that a former slave be received based on who he now is in Christ.

When we move from our relaxed Aussie culture that values equality and independence into a more hierarchical culture that values showing respect for those in authority, we may not always be aware of how we are perceived in the new culture. Without knowing, we may be perceived as 'giants'.

In my second month in Cambodia I was invited to a Khmer New Year feast in a village hundreds of kilometres from the Capital. In the early evening, mats were placed around the central house and groups were seated according to their status. As a single in my late twenties, I wondered if I would be placed with married couples who were about my age or with the singles in their teens and early twenties.

When I arrived I was ushered into the main room of the house. On the floor was a single mat and small bowls containing a few mouthfuls of each of the delicacies. I was invited to sit on that mat in the most honoured position in the village to share in the feast... by myself. I felt alone and excluded. But the intention was to honour me. That night, I accepted that it would take time for the Khmer to find where I would fit on one of their mats at the feast.

This was one of many aspects of the Khmer culture I needed to understand to minister contextually. Like Paul, we need to recognise power dynamics as well as how they can be transformed in Christ.

Thinking back on nine years in Cambodia, there were times I let people respectfully call me 'teacher'. (I'm not a qualified teacher!) Most of the time, however, I preferred 'sister' or 'aunty'. While I hoped my skills and hard work in ministry were found useful, the reality was that I needed to hold on to who I was in Christ, a beloved, useful, reclaimed slave like Onesimus.

Having been given a place on the mat, I am now responsible to use my giant strength to invite others to take their seat at the feast.

For more pearls of wisdom from Pip (isn't she great?!), watch episode 1 of this edition's videos: www.globalinteraction.org.au/ResonateVideos

