

March 1/2, 2008

From Useless to Useful

Philemon 8-25

Pastor Bryan Clark

In the midst of struggles, our disappointments and our failures, deep down inside us in that place where our insecurities lie, there is this longing for this scandalous thing we call grace.

This past week, I was having lunch with a friend of mine who is a theatre professor and somehow we got to talking about Victor Hugo's novel, Les Miserables that was made into a Broadway musical. There's a scene in there where Jean Valjean, the main character, has been released from prison where he feels like he's been dealt with very unjustly. He's angry and he's bitter at the world, he's spending the night with a bishop, steals the bishop's silver and flees. The police catch him and bring him back but in this moment, the bishop responds not with justice but with forgiveness.

As a matter of fact, he goes beyond, not only does he not press charges but he gives Jean Valjean the silver as his gift and encourages him to take a different path in life. And in that moment, that moment where Jean Valjean, for the first time experienced grace, his life was changed.

Philemon was a wealthy slave owner who had come into a relationship with Jesus through the ministry of Paul. He had a slave by the name of Onesimus, who has run away, encountered the Apostle Paul, has come to faith in Jesus and now Paul is sending him back. Paul wants Philemon to receive him with grace and forgiveness.

Sounds easy enough doesn't it? If you have a Bible, turn with us to the little New Testament book of Philemon. If you can find Thessalonians, keep going, Timothy, Titus, Philemon, 25 verses. Paul's letter to Philemon, responding to the story of the run away slave, Onesimus. Last week we took verses 1-7 and we learned that Paul is not anxious about how Philemon will respond, as a matter of fact, he says he's very confident. He's very joyful because he knows Philemon will respond correctly because Philemon is a Godly man.

He's a man who has this wonderful balance between faith and love. We talked about that, that faith is a reference to Christian doctrine and the important of doctrine is the foundation stone for grace. But doctrine properly understood is doctrine that leads to love, it's doctrine that leads to grace. Paul sees that as a pattern in Philemon's life so he's comfortable with how Philemon will respond. We pick it up then in verse 8:

Therefore, though I have enough confidence in Christ to order you to do what is proper, yet for love's sake I rather appeal to you--since I am such a person as Paul, the aged, and now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus—(*NASB, Philemon 8-9)

Therefore, on the basis of who Philemon is, Paul says, *I have enough confidence in Christ, in essence, to tell you what to do, to command you what to do.* When he says confidence in Christ, he's not talking about confidence in Philemon, confidence in Christ, meaning, confident in our Christian doctrine, understanding what is true now in this economy of grace, in what we have received from Jesus, he has enough confidence in what is the right thing to do to actually order Philemon to respond correctly.

In other words, what he's saying is this isn't a gray area, this isn't an area where they may have a difference of opinion, according to the doctrine of grace and according to what they have received, Paul's very clear on what the right thing is, so clear that he feels he can be confident in ordering Philemon to respond, but Philemon's his friend. And Philemon is a mature, godly, Christian brother and so rather than doing that, he says I'm going to take the high road and I'm going to appeal to you just on the basis of love that you do the right thing.

It's very dangerous to take any one passage and decide, that's the way it should always be done. For example, you read this passage and you say, that's right that's the way it should always be one. But you go to some of Paul's other writings and that's not the way he does it. It's not all that uncommon that Paul commands the believers what to do.

Maybe the most intense example would be Paul's letter to the Corinthians. From beginning to end of that book, Paul is saying, I command you to do this and this and this! He's telling them what to do as an apostle of Jesus Christ. What makes the difference, well, Paul says in the first couple chapters of 1 Corinthians, *you people are spiritual babies*. He says, *you people are spiritual infants, I'd love to feed you spiritual meat, but I have to feed you spiritual pabulum, spiritual milk because you're just little spiritual babies and so because of that, you don't know the right thing to do; I'm going to tell you the right thing to do*.

So, obviously it depends upon the audience. Paul's highest appeal would be the appeal of love. Now if we were in Philemon's shoes, we would quickly say, what we would like, more than anything, is to be treated like Paul treated Philemon, that it's an appeal of love. Can't we just sit down as Christian brothers and sisters that love one another and talk about this?

What I would say to all of us is if you want to be treated like Philemon, then you need to be like Philemon. What allowed Paul to respond in that way was Philemon's character, Philemon's commitment to Christian doctrine, Philemon's willingness not only to believe it but to live it and had a clear pattern in his life where Paul was saying I just have to appeal to you on the basis of love and I know you'll do the right thing.

Especially those of you that maybe have a bit of a struggle with authority and you don't like to be told what to do. There's a solution to that, have the character of Philemon. If you want to be treated like Philemon then be like Philemon because that is the best way.

Paul appeals on the basis also of who he is. Such a person as Paul, meaning he's Paul the apostle, he's Paul, Philemon's friend, they have a relationship together, the aged Paul. He's not saying I'm so old, I'm about to die. It's just simply an understanding in first century culture there was a great deal of respect that was given to those who were elders, those who were older. So, on the basis of their friendship and who Paul is, on the basis of his role as an elder and also on the basis of the fact that he's sitting in a Roman prison writing this, he put all those things together and Paul says, I know that you're going to listen to what I have to say and you'll respond correctly. And so, he's appealing to him on that basis.

I appeal to you for my child Onesimus, whom I have begotten in my imprisonment, who formerly was useless to you, but now is useful both to you and to me. I have sent him back to you in person, that is, sending my very heart, whom I wished to keep with me, so that on your behalf he might minister to me in my imprisonment for the

gospel; but without your consent I did not want to do anything, so that your goodness would not be, in effect, by compulsion but of your own free will. (vs. 10-14)

We're almost through the letter before Paul finally gets to the point and the point is Onesimus, the runaway slave, Paul says whom I have begotten in prison, meaning Paul has led Onesimus to Christ while he's in prison.

Now, we know for certain that that does not mean that Onesimus was in prison with Paul. As a runaway slave, as soon as Onesimus would have been in the Roman justice system, there would have been no way for Paul to have sent him home or really had any access to him, but that way Onesimus would have been in a serious amount of trouble. More likely, Onesimus, ran from Colossae, made his way about 1300 miles to Rome because of the size of Roman, he could just disappear in the big city and go on with his life.

Most likely, things did not go well, he hit bottom, he didn't know where else to turn, he probably knew of the great apostle from his master Philemon, heard that Paul was in the city and made his way to Paul in the Roman prison and it would not have been unusual for people to have access to prisoners, they develop a relationship, Paul leads him to faith.

He says, he was **formerly was useless to you, but now is useful both to you and to me.** We mentioned last week that the name Onesimus, literally means, useful. But Paul's using a play on words to say, but he was not useful, he was useless, whatever his problems were, whatever his issues were, whatever his attitudes were, most likely when he finally ran away, most of the people back home said fine, good riddance, he was useless anyway.

Put Paul identifies something radical is changed and the one who was useless yesterday is very useful today. So much so, Paul says that I love this guy, he's encouraged me, he's been part of the ministry team here, Paul says, when I send him to you, it's like sending my heart! This is like sending a part of me, obviously Onesimus has really endeared himself to Paul. And deep down in Paul's heart, he wants to keep him there. He wants to keep him there to encourage him and be part of the team. But instead, he knows the right thing to do is to send him back.

It's very important for us never to forget that as the Church of Jesus Christ, one of our foundational beliefs must be that God changes people. That's what God does. That's the whole point of grace, is God and His grace changes people who yesterday were useless and tomorrow could be very useful for God's eternal purposes.

I would suggest to you, the longer you're in the church, the easier it is to forget that. We just settle in to kind of our church stuff and we forget that God is in the business of radically changing people. It's easy to get your little circle of friends and that's all you interact with and you lose sight of the fact that all around you are people whose lives are being radically changed. Yesterday they were useless and today they are useful for God.

Out of this crowd this morning there have got to be those people that have prodigal children, that have a spouse that isn't so responsive. That have relationships in your life and you've convinced yourself, nothing's ever going to change. But the foundational belief of who we are as a church is God changes people. The apostle Paul was the most feared Christian killer of the first century. People were terrified of him. And yet, literally, in a matter of two or three days, he went from

Christian killer to Christian missionary. Because that's the core doctrine of the church is by the grace of Jesus Christ, God changes people and we have to always believe that.

As Paul writes to Philemon, it sounds like it could be kind of manipulative. It doesn't sound like Philemon has a lot of choice in the matter. But you have to understand that when Paul is sending Onesimus, Onesimus is hand delivering this letter. This is not a situation where Paul sends the letter and Onesimus is still back in Rome, where Paul is saying, you know, I guess I could send him to you if you really want to force that but sure is nice having him around; where it's just kind of manipulating the environment around.

That's not what's happening at all, Paul has actually already sent Onesimus, it's past tense. By the time Philemon is standing there reading this letter, Onesimus is standing right in front of him and when Paul says, *yeah, I know he was useless, but now he's useful, he's so useful to me I'd really like to have him stay because he's been a great help to me in my ministry.* You kind of imagine Philemon reading the letter and kind of looking up at Onesimus and trying to connect all this because that's not the Onesimus he has known.

It's not manipulative at all! The question on whether or not Onesimus is going to stay with Paul has already been answered. Paul's already sent him back, he's traveled 1300 very difficult miles. One of the big challenges Paul had is in the ancient world they had what we would call today, bounty hunters. They were slave hunters. They made their living by finding run away slaves and turning them back into the system. If Onesimus, anywhere along those 1300 miles ran into a bounty hunter, he was in big trouble. Slaves would either be executed or branded somewhere on the face so that they would never run away again.

If Paul can get Onesimus by the bounty hunters and all the way home, then he presents this letter to Philemon. And as Philemon is reading the letter, Onesimus stands before him, he's back. But the challenge is, Philemon doesn't have thirty or sixty days to see if this is going to work out. You know, let's just kind of do a probation period here. It doesn't work that way. Philemon would have been expected to immediately mediate out punishment. The Roman workforce was about half, about half the workforce were slaves. That's about sixty million slaves. And the Roman government clearly understood, if these slaves ever decided to start a revolt, there would be chaos in the streets. Therefore, it was expected of any slave owner to deal very harshly with a runaway slave, to say to, not only their own slaves but for the sake of other slave owners, this is what happens when you do that, to make sure it never happened again.

And that would have been expected, that would have been the norm. It's easy for us to sit here 2,000 years later and say, *well, the right thing to do is really obvious.* It wasn't obvious to them. What Paul was asking for was absolutely unheard of in that culture. So, as soon as Onesimus gets back Philemon not going to say, "You know, let's just take a couple of months and work this out and see how it goes." He had to make an immediate decision, based on what Paul has shared.

The details Paul has shared are not to manipulate Philemon into action. Paul is trying to say, this guy has changed so much, it's like now he's a part of my own heart. He's changed so much that I'd love to keep him here because he's such a valuable asset to the ministry. I'm sure Philemon is hearing that and thinking, "Man, something has changed!" Because when this guy left we all said, "Good riddance, we just as soon you don't come back!" He was totally useless.

So, Paul's not trying to manipulate the environment, he's trying to get Philemon to realize, he's changed so much that Philemon needs to give him a chance. Verse 15:

For perhaps he was for this reason separated from you for a while, that you would have him back forever, no longer as a slave, but more than a slave, a beloved brother, especially to me, but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord.

(vs. 15-16)

Paul says, "You know, maybe this has been part of God's plan." And God allowed Onesimus to run and to finally hit bottom in order that he might look to Paul, in order that he might come to faith in Jesus, in order that I might send him back to you no longer a slave but a brother, a brother in Christ who will now spend forever with you in eternity.

I do love the fact that Paul uses the word "perhaps". God's will is very mysterious. It's dangerous to act like we always know exactly what's going based on our circumstances, we don't! And even the great Apostle Paul was careful not say, "This is what's happening". But he is posing the question, perhaps this is part of God's plan. In order that at the end of the day, Onesimus might come to faith, that his soul would be changed and you could be together forever.

He's wanting Philemon to say, no matter what really has transpired in regard to circumstances, at the end of the day, Onesimus has come to faith in Jesus and he's back. And isn't that what really matters?

Sometimes it's hard for us to dispense grace because we're spending way too much time trying to process the circumstances, trying to figure everything out. And when somebody deeply wounds us, we want to go back and we want to relive it all, we want to analyze it all, we want to figure it all out and even if they come back repentant, we're still determined to make 'em pay or to figure it all out or process through it all. And maybe sometimes we just need say, I don't know exactly what happened, I don't know exactly where God figures into that, all I know is because of these circumstances, this person has finally hit bottom, found Jesus, has repented of their sins and they want to come home.

And at that point, what is the value of going backwards and rehashing all the stuff, rather than just saying, for whatever happened, all I know is this person's been changed and on the basis of grace, can't we just move forward?

When that prodigal child, when that distant spouse, when that person who has deeply wounded you finally comes back, having been changed by the power of Jesus, there's no point in going back through all the stuff, the point is God used that stuff to radically change a heart and all that matters now is let's accept that and believe that and let's go forward.

I often hear parents talking about their children who are very repentant and they say, "But, they still need to be punished." And the question would be, "Why, why?" If in the course of those circumstances, God has got a hold of their heart and their heart has melted and they've repented before God, why do they need to be punished? Why can't we celebrate that there's circumstances, God did something! And let's see that for what it is and let's go on. And that's what Paul is encouraging Philemon to do.

If then you regard me a partner, accept him as you would me. But if he has wronged you in any way or owes you anything, charge that to my account; I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand, I will repay it (not to mention to you that you owe to me even your own self as well). Yes, brother, let me benefit from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in Christ. (vs. 17-20)

Paul says, if we're partners, that's a Greek word for business partners, if we're ministry partners, if we're in this together, I'll tell you what, just receive him back, if he owes you, it's highly likely that Onesimus stole from Philemon when he fled and Paul's saying, you know, if he owes you, charge it to my account and I'll pay you. Onesimus owes a debt he can't pay, so Paul says I'll pay a debt I don't owe, in order to make this thing right.

Do you hear the theology in that? Do you hear this lesson where Paul is, in essence, becoming a Christ figure in the relationship of Onesimus? And he is saying, you know, that's what grace is all about. At one time I owed a debt I couldn't pay so Jesus paid a debt he couldn't owe. And now my beloved spiritual son owes a debt he can't pay so I'll pay a debt I don't owe. I'm going to extend to him what Jesus has extended to me and, of course, the intent is for Philemon to hear the same message, that Philemon has been extended scandalous grace from God and encouraging him to extend then the same grace to his runaway slave Onesimus.

When Paul says, "I've written it with my own hand", it's like what we call today, a promissory note. Paul is promising, if he owes you something, I'll pay it. But then he puts in this parenthetical statement, "But, by the way Philemon, you owe me." There's an understanding that what put Paul in prison was not just preaching the Gospel, it was preaching the Gospel to the Gentiles. If you remember when we went through the book of Acts, the Jews tolerated it, tolerated it until finally the message went to the Gentiles, that was the breaking point. And at that point they plotted to arrest him and throw him in prison.

Philemon clearly understands that Paul paid a tremendous price to get the Gospel to Philemon. Paul sacrificed himself so that Philemon might know and now Paul is asking for Philemon to make some significant sacrifices for the sake of his new Christian brother, his runaway slave Onesimus. Verse 21:

Having confidence in your obedience, I write to you, since I know that you will do even more than what I say.

What could be 'even more'? The 'even more' would be that you would release him as a slave. Clearly this small letter of Philemon communicates how Paul feels about slavery, about slavery in light of the truth of the Gospel. But rather than protesting in the streets, there's an understanding that as this Gospel of grace through the church of Jesus Christ penetrates, eventually slavery will be overturned. But, what he is saying to Philemon, is you'll do even more, you'll let him go because that's the right thing to do.

Sounds simple enough doesn't it? But there's a lot of problems, what happens when this runaway slave comes back and just get's forgiven? What are the other slaves to think? What are the other slave owners going to say? If Paul goes beyond that and actually give him his freedom, then what are the other slaves going to think? If you run away and come back then you get set free? All you have to do is pretend that you've become a Christian and have this conversion experience and you'll get set free! I mean, he's going to create chaos in streets, what's he to do?

I mentioned last week that if you really don't want to be criticized, just mediate out justice, everybody gets it, everybody understands it, nobody will say a word. But when you start mediating out this scandalous thing we call grace, hang on! Because you are going to be criticized, because people don't get it and they don't understand it.

Over the years, I've found the number one complaint for grace is if you do that, they'll be chaos in the streets, people are going to run full speed back into the world, it's a cheap grace. The only way to keep Christians in line is the law, they don't say it, but that is what they're saying. I'll tell you this, if you want people to rebel and turn to the world, just crank up the law.

Over my 25 years of ministry, I have not seen grace cause people to run full speed back in the world, just of the opposite. Once people are touched by this unimaginable and explainable thing called grace, they just want more. They just want more, they run full speed toward God.

At the same time also prepare me a lodging, for I hope that through your prayers I will be given to you. Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, greets you, as do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, Luke, my fellow workers. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. (vs. 22-25)

Paul lists, basically, the same people he lists in the end of Colossians which is one reason why we think the two letters were written at the same time, probably hand delivered at the same time. And then the letter ends as it began with the reminder of grace.

We mentioned last week, that every Onesimus needs a Philemon, every run away slave, needs a graceful master. But I would say also, every run away slave needs a Paul. A Paul who's willing roll up his sleeves, get involved in the mess and see this runaway, confused slave come to faith in Jesus and then to get involved in his life to such an extent that you say, you know, I'm going to walk with you hand in hand, arm in arm, back into this world of grace.

If you remember the story, that's what somebody did with Paul. Paul is on the road to Damascus, when he encountered the resurrected Jesus and his life was forever changed. Paul was a feared Christian killer, but he was radically changed and in a couple of days, he's preaching the Gospel! And it's so upset the Jews that they put together a plot in order to arrest him and execute him and the only way Paul could be saved was they put him in a basket and lowered him over the wall in the middle of the night in order that he might escape, he went back to Jerusalem.

Paul's fearing for his life, he's got nowhere to go, shows up in Jerusalem and he wants to find refuge with the Christians but they won't let him in. He wants to join in with the Apostles but they won't let him. This guy is a Christian killer, this is the most feared man on the face of the planet for them and they said, absolutely not, he can't be part of the club. And it was Barnabus that stepped up and said, this man has been changed.

I saw what happened in Damascus, he was proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus at the risk of his own life! They actually tried to kill him and we had to sneak him out in the middle of the night, he has been radically changed and he's one of us and we need to let him in the club.

Every Paul needs a Barnabus and every Onesimus needs a Paul. People who are willing to roll up their sleeves and get in the middle of the mess often, with great criticism, and say I believe in the

power of Jesus to change life and I'm going to walk with you and I'm going to walk along side of you and I'm going to be your friend.

There were a group of educators at Oxford University that were discussing, what is it that makes Christianity unique? What is it that makes it different? And they discussed a number of different topics until C.S. Lewis walked into the room and so they posed the question to him. And he responded by saying, "That's easy, the difference is grace." What sets Christianity apart from every world religion is this thing we call grace.

David Seamands, who's been a lifelong Christian counselor and he wrote this:

"Many years ago I was driven to the conclusion that the two major causes of most emotional problems among evangelical Christians are these: the failure to understand, receive and live out God's unconditional grace and forgiveness and the failure to give out that unconditional love, forgiveness and grace to others. We read, we hear, we believe a good theology of grace but that's just not the way we live."

I would say after 25 years of ministry that is right on, that is right on. Gordon McDonald says this, ***"The world can do almost anything as well, or not better, than the church. You need not be a Christian to build houses, feed the hungry or heal the sick. There is only one thing the world cannot do, it cannot offer grace."***¹

I would suggest to you that the most attractive attribute, the most attractive feature of the church of Jesus Christ is this scandalous thing we call grace. Because in this world of judgment and finger pointing, there's nothing like it, there's nothing like it. My prayer would be that we would be known as a church of grace. Grace is not indifference, grace is not tolerance, grace is just like looking like Jesus. That when people walk through these doors, the runaway slaves, the prodigals, the strugglers, that they would encounter the grace of Jesus Christ from the people of God in such a way that they would long for more, the more that can only be found in the life changing power and grace of Jesus Christ. May we rightly represent the grace of Jesus, this wonderful, scandalous thing called grace.

Our Father, we're thankful for this amazing grace, Lord, everyone of us who have trusted at Jesus as Savior at one time were that run away slave, we were that prodigal son. Most of us could tell our stories of the Barnabus or the Saul or the Philemon, that rolled up their sleeves and got involved in our lives that lead us to the Savior. Lord, I pray that we as a church might be known as a place of grace in this world full of judgment, finger pointing and self-righteousness may we be a refuge as a place of grace, that as people experience the grace of God's people, they will move them one step closer to experiencing the ultimate grace and forgiveness of our Savior. Lord, this we pray, in Jesus' name, Amen.

¹ From p. 15 of What's So Amazing About Grace? By Philip D. Yancey (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997)

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Study Questions
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Opening Discussion

1. Can you think of a time when someone extended unexpected grace to you? What was the impact on your life?
2. Have you ever been criticized for extending grace to someone else? Why do people seem to accept justice but criticize grace?
3. In the first century culture, slavery was so much a part of the Roman culture that even Christians often failed to see the true moral nature of the issue. Centuries later it was common for both European and American Christians to own slaves without the slightest moral conviction. It's easy to believe we, as Christians, would have known better but chances are we would not have.

What can we do to prevent being so immersed in our culture that we fail to see the true nature of moral issues around us?

How can we make sure we're not justifying things that God would say are morally wrong?

Bible Study

1. Read Philemon 8-25. What is Paul's approach to Philemon? How does this compare for example with Paul's letter to the Corinthians which is filled with commands to be obeyed? What determines the difference between commanding and appealing?
2. Why does Paul share such a concern for a useless, runaway slave? Compare Colossians 1:13, 14. What are the practical implications of believing Jesus has the power to change someone from useless to useful?
3. Paul's appeal to Philemon is to respond to Onesimus on the basis of grace, believing he has changed, rather than according to justice which would mean some level of punishment. What do we learn from this? How does this affect how we approach our children, family members, work associates, etc.? What seems to be the key determining factor between responding with grace or justice?
4. Why does Paul put his reputation on the line for the sake of Onesimus? Compare Acts 9:26-31. What do the repentant runaway slaves around us need from us? Practically, what might this look like for us?

5. What is the picture of grace being painted in 17-20? Compare with Matthew 18:21-35. What should motivate us to extend grace to others, even at great personal cost?

Application

1. Is there an “Onesimus” in your life now that needs some love and grace? What would that look like for you to extend this person grace?
2. Is there a situation you are dealing with now where you are not sure what grace might look like or not sure how to respond rightly? Share it with the group and maybe others can help you sort out a right response.
3. Is there a pre-converted “Onesimus” in your life now that is “useless” and it’s hard to imagine this person as changed and “useful?” Take some time as a group and pray for God to change that person by His grace.