

Wheelersburg Baptist Church 1/24/93 PM
Philemon 8-11 "How a Useless Person Became Useful"

Intro:

Illust: "You'll never make it. You'll never succeed..."

Are there people in your life that you feel like giving up on? Or already have?

Tonight: "How a Useless Person Can Become Useful."

Humanist philosophers would say, "Don't give up on people. Down deep inside of every human being, there is a great spark of potential. Take that individual, reprogram him, give him a better environment, give him a better education, clear his mind of crazy religious notions about God and sin and guilt, and he'll turn out great."

Is that true? No. Something is missing. The potential lies not within the creature, but within the Creator. We are sinners. And sin ruins lives. But God is in the business of taking ruined lives and turning them into faithful citizens of His kingdom. Jesus Christ can transform a useless person into a useful person.

Q: How does He do it?

One of the most amazing accounts of such a feat is recorded for us in the tiny little book of Philemon.

Background of Philemon:

--written by Paul while in prison in Rome (about 3 decades after Christ's ascen)

--to a close personal friend of Paul, named Philemon

As we saw last week, Philemon was a breath of fresh air to Paul. He had a...

1. Great Relationships (5)--with the Lord and with people
2. Great Resources (6)
3. Great Reputation (7)

V 7 "For we have great joy...because the hearts of the saints are refreshed by you"

But Paul didn't write a newsletter to Philemon. He had one main item of business in mind. It was a delicate subject to bring up. It was real "heavy" to discuss, even with a close friend like Philemon.

Beginning in v 8, he pens the heart of the letter. The issue, of course, had to do with a runaway slave named Onesimus. Philemon was his master. Onesimus had robbed Philemon and skipped town. He headed for the capital city of the Empire, Rome. By God's sovereign design, he ended up meeting Paul, who was incarcerated there because of preaching the gospel. Paul introduced him to Jesus Christ.

Q: What difference did Christ make in Onesimus' life?

The same difference He can make in lives today!

Illust:

Proposition: In Philemon 8-11, Paul shares with us how Jesus Christ turned a useless person into a useful person.

I. Paul's Approach (8-9)

A. What he could have done (8)

- B. What he did (9)
- II. Paul's Appeal (10-11)
 - A. What Onesimus USED to be = USELESS
 - B. What Onesimus was NOW = USEFUL
 - 1. Useful to Paul
 - a. As a son
 - b. As a fellow-servant
 - 2. Useful to Philemon
 - a. As a Profitable Servant
 - b. As a Precious Brother in Christ

I. Paul's Approach (8-9)

Q: How did Paul handle the delicate situation concerning Onesimus?

A. What he could have done (8)

V 8 "Wherefore though I might be much bold..."

"Wherefore" = according; Paul just commended him for refreshing, so...

"to enjoin" = to command

Paul had the right to charge Philemon. He could have insisted on Philemon restoring Onesimus. It was the Christian thing to do. Forgiveness is not optional. It's the obligation of every believer (Col 3:12-13). And if Philemon resisted, Paul could have told the Colossian church to get involved. He could have commanded them to discipline Philemon if he refused to obey God's Word in the way he treated Onesimus.

Paul could have commanded Philemon. After all, he was an apostle. He had the clout. He had the right.

Furthermore, he had the right because he had led Philemon to Christ. It would have been appropriate for him to be assertive with his spiritual son. After all, what he was going to ask Philemon to do was "fitting" (=proper).

Paul could have. But you know, sometimes it's best to lay down your rights. There are times when it could do more harm than good to use your authority to get something done. You may win the battle, but lose the war.

Illust: Parents with children, "Do it because I said so..."

Illust:

B. What he did (9)

V 9 "Yet for love's sake I rather beseech thee..."

Instead of approaching the situation as an apostle to a church member, Paul addressed Philemon as a friend. "Philemon, I want to bare my heart to you, brother to brother."

Paul didn't command. He "beseeched." What does that mean?

"beseech" = "parakalo"; to call to one's side; to exhort, encourage, appeal

Q: On what credentials did Paul base his appeal? Three...

1. His Standard

V 9 "For love's sake"

Jesus had said, "By this shall all men know that you are my disciples...love..."(Jn 13:35). Paul exhorted the Romans, "Owe no man anything, but to love o.a.; for he that loves another has fulfilled the law (Rom 13:8)." In I Cor 13 the apostle made it clear that the greatest virtue, the greatest standard of Christian maturity is agape love.

On that basis Paul made his appeal to Philemon--"for love's sake."

2. His Age

V 9 "Paul the aged"

lit. "The Elder"--In Paul's day, older men were considered wise and thus authoritative. We've lost that sense of appreciation for the wisdom of the elderly in our day. God designed the "godly grisslies" (as Hendricks calls the senior men) to lead the way in the church. Those who've been down the road, who have walked with God for many years, who have seen Christ work in and through them in their family life and job life and community life, have much to say to the younger generations.

Paul was not ancient (between 55 and 60 years). But he was aged.

3. His Experience

V 9 "and now also a prisoner of Jesus Christ"

Was Paul trying to evoke Philemon's sympathy? Perhaps. Again, remember he's talking to a good friend. He says, "Philemon, I'm a prisoner of and for Jesus Christ. I belong to Him. It's because of allegiance to Christ that I am held captive. Philemon, I've paid a price for my service to Christ? Have you? I'm going to ask you to do something that may be costly to you in human terms. It may hurt your business contacts. It may put you on bad terms with the other masters in Colossae. But it will please our Master, Jesus Christ."

Illust:

Tran: So that was Paul's approach.

II. Paul's Appeal (10-11)

Notice Paul repeats his desire again...

V 10 "I beseech thee" (already used in v 9)

He doesn't mention what his appeal is until v 12.

V 12 "receive him (Ones)"

This was a serious request. How would Philemon respond to this runaway slave that had blackened his eye? How would he treat him? Paul pleaded with his friend to receive Onesimus with open arms.

Q: Why would that be difficult?

A. What Onesimus USED to be = USELESS

V 11 "Who in time past was to thee unprofitable"

"unprofitable" = lit. "not" + "to use" = useless

At one time, Onesimus was a useless slave. There was no getting around it. Paul made no excuses for him. I don't know if he was lazy on the job, or if he shirked his responsibilities, or if he was a talker instead of a worker on the job. Maybe he lied by calling in sick when he wasn't, or cut out early. I don't know. We do know he eventually cheated his boss, and fled. He was useless.

Paul didn't gloss over Onesimus' past. He was upfront about it. He used to be "useless," "unprofitable."

But that was when? "in time past"

That's the way Onesimus was when he was unsaved. He was "useless" before he met Christ.

But that had changed. When? When he met Christ!

Illust: I was talking with a couple this week. God is working in their lives. They're searching, and have been attending for a couple of months. I explained the gospel to them. "Has everybody in your church experienced what you're talking about?" "If so, we can't help but wonder when we look at their lives..."

B. What Onesimus was NOW = USEFUL

V 11 "But now profitable..."

Jesus Christ really changed Onesimus' life. He was now "profitable." In fact, that's what his name means, "profitable." That's the marvel of the gospel of Christ-- Useless people are transformed into useful people.

Challenge: Christians ought to be the best workers, citizens. We ought to have great reputations as "useful" people.

Onesimus was useful, in two ways...

1. Useful to Paul

Notice how the apostle described Onesimus in v 10.

V 10 "for my son..."

Q: In what ways did Paul consider Onesimus to be useful to him?

a. As a son

Paul actually called Onesimus his son (lit. "my own child" 10).

"begotten" = to bring forth

Notice Paul says, "whom I have begotten." "I" gave birth. There's a sense in which the person who leads another to Christ is a spiritual parent.

Did you ever notice how Paul thought of himself as a "father" to the people he won to the Lord? He called Timothy his son. He called Titus his son. So too Onesimus.

Challenge: I am responsible for the nurturing and development of my children. I love Julie and Katie. You love your children too. You'll make great sacrifices to make sure they grow properly. That's our responsibility.

Listen. We have no less a responsibility to spiritual children. When God gives us the privilege of birthing a spiritual child, we are responsible to stand by them and help them grow.

Q: Have you ever led anyone to Christ? Are they growing today? If not, what are you doing about it? You say, "That's not my business, is it?" Ask Paul.

Q: S.S teachers, do you take responsibility for the members in your class? Do you agonize over their spiritual development? Do you labor for them in prayer? Do you get involved in their lives so as to help them grow? Or do you think your task is done after you've covered the lesson on Sunday morning?

The same goes for Youth workers, Awana workers, Deacons with Caring groups. God holds us responsible for those He has placed under our care.

Illust:

It was not all giving when it came to Paul's relationship with Onesimus...

b. As a fellow-servant

V 10 "in my bonds"

Can anything good come out of prison? It was a "waste" wasn't it, that Paul was thrown in prison. God really "needed" him out in the free world evangelizing, didn't He? No. God had Paul right where he was needed. Even in prison, even in bonds, God could use Paul.

But watch this. God transformed a useless slave, and gave him a vital prison ministry.

V 13 "Whom I would have retained...ministered unto me in the bonds..."

Wow! The apostle said that Ones ministered to him. What a switch! That's the goal of discipleship. To take a babe in Christ to the place where he/she is personally involved in a ministry for Jesus Christ.

Illust:

2. *Useful to Philemon*

V 11 "profitable to THEE"

In 2 ways...

a. As a Profitable Servant

Jesus Christ gave Onesimus a whole new reason for living. He made him a better worker. He formerly was a thorn in Philemon's side, but now he could be a great asset to his master.

b. As a Precious Brother in Christ

Vv 15-16 "For perhaps he departed...not now as a servant...but a brother..."

More about that next week.

Illust:

Conclusion:

What an incredible story! Jesus Christ turned a useless slave into a useful member of the Body of Christ.

Q: Does Jesus Christ still do that sort of thing?

Q: Can He do it with people like us?

Challenge: Never give up on people. Christ can make useless people useful!