

“Transforming Grace”  
Philemon 1:10-16  
(Preached at Trinity, July 30, 2023)

I’m supplying these notes for the benefit of busy pastors who may be engaged in bi-vocational work, feeling the pressure of preparing to preach twice on the Lord’s Day while trying to balance full-time secular work as well as caring for their families. While the notes of another man are no substitute for personal study, I pray that these may aid in the process of preparing to preach.

**Disclaimer:** These are the actual notes I bring with me to the pulpit, which I follow loosely. They are not designed for publication. While I try to make every effort to give proper credit to my sources from the pulpit, adequate citations will sometimes be absent from my notes. If anyone feels their intellectual material has been used without adequate citation, please contact me and I’ll make immediate correction giving credit.

1. Everything up to this point has served as an introduction. Paul has established the kind of man Philemon was. He was a man full of faith and love. He demonstrated this love continually towards the saints at Colossae.  
**Philemon 1:7 NAU** - "For I have come to have much joy and comfort in your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you, brother."
2. Paul is writing this letter with a particular purpose, but up to this point, he hasn’t given any hints as to what the purpose is. He was about to make a solemn request of Philemon, one of which Philemon’s compliance was of great importance. Paul had confidence that Philemon would do the right thing.  
**Philemon 1:8-9 NAU** - "Therefore, though I have enough confidence in Christ to order you *to do* what is proper, <sup>9</sup> 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-- But up to now, Paul doesn’t give a hint as to what he wanted Philemon to do."
3. Beginning with **Verse 10** Paul finally gets to the reason for writing. For the first time he mentions the name Onesimus; a name Philemon knew all too well.
  - a. As I stated at the beginning, we aren’t fully sure what the issue was between Philemon and Onesimus, but they knew. Some form of breach had taken place with the relationship between this master and his slave.
  - b. We might note that this letter was to be read publicly before the church. They all knew Onesimus. They all knew of his absence and probably also knew of the tensions between Onesimus and Philemon.
  - c. But we aren’t given the details of the problems between Philemon and his slave. There are many opinions ranging from Onesimus as a runaway to Onesimus as an extortioner.  
Whatever the infraction, there is no doubt there is no doubt that there was some form of alienation.  
**Philemon 1:17-18 NAU** - " If then you regard me a partner, accept him as *you would* me. <sup>18</sup> But if he has wronged you in any way or owes you anything, charge that to my account;"
4. This we know. When Philemon last saw Onesimus he was an unbeliever. He was particularly troublesome for Philemon. Paul affirms that he was a useless slave.  
**Philemon 1:11 NAU** - "who formerly was useless to you"  
And again, like so many other aspects of this letter, Paul doesn’t share with why he is referring to Onesimus as “useless.”
5. This we know. Whatever Onesimus was, he had undergone an amazing transformation. Paul is probably intentionally playing off the name of Onesimus. His name means “useful.” Imagine having a slave whose name is “useful” who was actually completely useless.

## I. Salvation changes behavior

- A. Before grace Onesimus was described as useless
1. Perhaps he was lazy. Maybe he continually resisted Philemon's authority. Did his actions encourage insubordination from the other slaves. And there remains the possibility that he had run away.
  2. Paul is describing the before and after of Onesimus. Before he was a Christian and after he came to saving faith. As I've pointed out on numerous occasions, it is important that we have a solid theology regarding salvation. In order to have a right understanding of salvation, you have to have a right understanding of human nature.
  3. You need to have an understanding of the nature of fallen humanity. What effect does sin have upon a human being?
    - a. Paul says Onesimus in his fallen condition was useless. Paul is referring to his condition as an unbeliever.
    - b. We have to be careful here. Sin does not leave a person as bad as he can be. There are many lost men who are good providers for their families. There are many lost women who are good wives and mothers. Philemon might have had other lost slaves who were not nearly as troublesome as Onesimus.
    - c. It is also true that some believers bring shame upon Christ in how they live. The New Testament continually admonishes us.  
**Ephesians 5:5-8 NAU** - "For this you know with certainty, that no or impure person or covetous man, who is an idolater, has an inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God. <sup>6</sup> Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience. <sup>7</sup> Therefore do not be partakers with them; <sup>8</sup> for you were formerly darkness, but now you are Light in the Lord; walk as children of Light"  
 It is a shame when an unbeliever is actually a better employee than his coworker who professes to know Christ. It is a contradiction.
    - d. Onesimus in his fallen condition lacked the sanctifying graces of the Holy Spirit. He lacked the fruit of regeneration.
    - e. It is also true that, apart from Christ, nothing we do is accepted as righteous. Our best deeds are rejected.  
*London Baptist Confession, Chapter 16 – "Of Good Works"*  
**5.** "We cannot by our best works merit pardon of sin or eternal life at the hand of God, by reason of the great disproportion that is between them and the glory to come, and the infinite distance that is between us and God, whom by them we can neither profit nor satisfy for the debt of our former sins; but when we have done all we can, we have done but our duty, and are unprofitable servants; and because as they are good they proceed from his Spirit, and as they are wrought by us they are defiled and mixed with so much weakness and imperfection, that they cannot endure the severity of God's punishment."

7. “Works done by unregenerate men, although for the matter of them they may be things which God commands, and of good use both to themselves and others; yet because they proceed not from a heart purified by faith, nor are done in a right manner according to the word, nor to a right end, the glory of God, they are therefore sinful, and cannot please God, nor make a man meet to receive grace from God, and yet their neglect of them is more sinful and displeasing to God.”
4. In his lost, unbelieving condition Onesimus lived according to his sinful nature. He lived according to the flesh.  
**Galatians 5:19-21 NAU** - "Now the deeds of the flesh are evident, which are: immorality, impurity, sensuality, <sup>20</sup> idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, disputes, dissensions, factions, <sup>21</sup> envying, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these, of which I forewarn you, just as I have forewarned you, that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God."
- B. Paul's point was this was the past - "who formerly was useless to you"
1. Onesimus was no longer who he was.  
**Philemon 1:11 NAU** - "who formerly was useless to you, but now is useful both to you and to me."
  2. What happened? What brought about the transformation?  
**Philemon 1:10 NAU** - "I appeal to you for my child Onesimus, whom I have begotten in my imprisonment,"
    - a. When Onesimus arrived before Paul he was mad, resentful, perhaps belligerent. Perhaps he hated his master, Philemon. He felt Philemon treated him too harshly.
    - b. But Paul began teaching him the Gospel of Christ. Onesimus began hearing the good news of the Gospel. The Holy Spirit changed him. He was birthed into the Kingdom and everything changed. He was transformed from being useless and worthless, to useful and valuable—both to Philemon and Paul.
    - c. Onesimus now had a new Master.  
**Ephesians 6:5-9 NAU** - "Slaves, be obedient to those who are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in the sincerity of your heart, as to Christ; <sup>6</sup> not by way of eyeservice, as men-pleasers, but as slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart. <sup>7</sup> With good will render service, as to the Lord, and not to men, <sup>8</sup> knowing that whatever good thing each one does, this he will receive back from the Lord, whether slave or free. <sup>9</sup> And masters, do the same things to them, and give up threatening, knowing that both their Master and yours is in heaven, and there is no partiality with Him."

3. One of the great descriptions of God's transforming grace is summarized by the word, "new."

**2 Corinthians 5:17 NAU** - "Therefore if anyone is in Christ, *he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come.*"

**Romans 6:3-4 NAU** - "Or do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into His death?<sup>4</sup> Therefore we have been buried with Him through baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life."

Matthew Henry writes: "Regenerating grace creates a new world in the soul; all things are new. The renewed man acts from new principles, by new rules, with new ends, and in new company."<sup>1</sup>

4. The new Onesimus had been a great blessing to Paul. Paul was under house arrest and Onesimus had been valuable in helping to meet his needs. Paul is saying that Onesimus would now be of great value to Philemon.
5. Paul uses different prefixes to modify the same word - χρηστός – An adjective pointing to something good or useful.  
 ἄχρηστος – not useful, i.e. useless  
 εὐχρηστος – of good use, i.e. useful  
 Paul is pointing to the change, the transformation.

C. This describes the before and after picture of each of us.

1. Before God saved us, while in our fallen condition we were useless--unprofitable.
- a. This is hard for us to receive in our prideful heart. We are more characterized by boastfulness than humility.  
 But the truth is, apart from Christ we are useless.
- b. We need to understand the nature of our relationship with God—the relationship between God and man. We were created in the image of God to reflect His glory. The catechism asks the question: What is the chief end of man? Man's chief end is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever. In our fallen condition we fail in that very basic purpose. We refuse to give God the praise that is rightfully His. We are useless, unprofitable.
- Romans 1:21 NAU** - "For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks, but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened."
2. Before God saved us we were condemned. We were on our way to an endless torment in hell. We were given over to a reprobate mind. We were children of disobedience. We were chaff to be cast away and burned.
- Romans 3:10-12 NAU** - "as it is written, "There is none righteous, not even one; <sup>11</sup> There is none who understands, There is none who seeks for God; <sup>12</sup> All have turned aside, together they have become useless"

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible: Complete and Unabridged in One Volume* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1994), 2284.

**Titus 1:16-2:1 NAU** - "They profess to know God, but by *their* deeds they deny *Him*, being detestable and disobedient and worthless for any good deed."

3. But that was before God's transforming grace. We are now God's beloved, children of grace, forgiven.

## II. Salvation changes relationships

### A. Philemon and Onesimus were estranged from one another

1. Onesimus had sought Paul's aid. Paul is writing this with the hopes of bringing reconciliation.

**Philemon 1:12 NAU** - " I have sent him back to you in person, that is, *sending* my very heart,"

**Philemon 1:15-16 NAU** - " For perhaps he was for this reason separated *from you* for a while, that you would have him back forever, <sup>16</sup> 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."

2. Christianity changes relationships. Philemon remained the master and Onesimus remained the slave, but everything was changing.

William Barclay -

"Christianity introduced a new relationship in which the human divisions in society ceased to matter. It is to be noted that this new relationship never gave slaves the right to take advantage of it; rather, it made them better slaves and more efficient servants, for now they had to do things in such a way that they could offer them to Christ. Nor did it mean that the master must be soft and easy-going, willing to accept bad work and inferior service; but it did mean that he no longer treated any servant as a thing, but as a person and a brother or sister in Christ."<sup>2</sup>

### B. Our greatest reconciliation is with Christ.

1. Prior to our salvation we were alienated from Christ. We hated His rule and reign.
  - a. It's like the parable of the nobleman who went to a far country.
 

**Luke 19:14 NAU** - "But his citizens hated him and sent a delegation after him, saying, 'We do not want this man to reign over us.'"
  - b. We hated God's Son and hated the Gospel.
2. In salvation we have been brought to peace. The war has ended. Our weapons have been discarded.
3. Jesus is our beloved and we are His.

## Conclusion:

The Christian spends his life and energy seeking to honor Christ. We are truly new creatures in Christ. This is the work of His transforming grace. It is the fruit of His Spirit who indwells us.

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<sup>2</sup> William Barclay, *The Letters to Timothy, Titus, and Philemon*, 3rd ed. fully rev. and updated., The New Daily Study Bible (Louisville, KY; London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 307.