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READ PHILEMON. What do you think? Will faith change your life, and the world for better? How much emphasis do you put on your faith? Do you expect to be different—or expect others to be different—because you or they are people of faith? How much does your faith affect others?

Think about your Christian friends. Have they influenced your faith? Can you remember a time that someone said something that encouraged you to go deeper and even step out of your comfort zone? That has happened to me again and again.

C. S. Lewis wrote, “[T]he Church exists for nothing else but to draw men into Christ, to make them little Christs. If they are not doing that, all the cathedrals, clergy, missions, sermons, even the Bible itself, are simply a waste of time.” (from *Mere Christianity*)

Paul was drawing his friend, Philemon, into Christ to become a “little Christ.”

You might be a little shocked about this letter. It is a personal letter about a very personal issue. Why was it included as part of the Bible?

You might be a little shocked by the subject matter of slavery. Shouldn’t the Bible be about denouncing stuff that is wrong? There are often wrong things in the world that are not addressed directly in Scripture. But they are all addressed indirectly.

For example, Paul wrote in Colossians, “You have taken off your old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator. Here there is no Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, *slave or free*, but Christ is all, and is in all” (Col 3:9-10).

That verse addresses the Christian reality that no one is diminished, but to God, *all people are created equal*.

Though Paul, in this letter, does not directly criticize slavery, he’s changing society’s view of slavery from within, by challenging people through Philemon’s story to change their attitude toward slaves. All men and women, regardless of status, are equal in Christ.

Paul is shaping the reader(s)—Philemon and you—to become “little Christs.”

Are you seeing through a lens of equality in the Christian faith? The Christian faith is filled with a variety of people with a plethora of talents, and none are inferior; “For (we) have all sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Ro. 3:23). As a result, God has made salvation accessible through grace, by faith. (Read Eph. 2:8-9)

Paul bore this message all over Asia and started numerous churches. A man heard Paul speak, a successful man named Philemon, who lived in Colossae. He probably traveled to Ephesus on business and he got saved. He met Jesus. He became a Christian. *Now what?*

When he went home to Colossae, how would Jesus, his new friend Paul, and other believers impact his life? Would there be changes? How would going to church affect him? The first thing he did was open his home for the church to meet there.

Philemon had a slave named Onesimus. The meaning of his name is “useful or profitable,” but he was far from useful. In fact, Philemon referred to him as “*USELESS*.” Onesimus’s attitude was less-than-the-best. We know nothing more except that he had a quest for freedom and he finally ran away to Rome, probably paying his way with money stolen from Philemon.

He became a fugitive in Rome. At the same time, Paul had been imprisoned in Rome and as fate would have it, Onesimus ended up with Paul. Perhaps he sought Paul out. Perhaps he hit bottom. We don’t know. But, this smacks of God’s work! God cares so much about people and relationships and circumstances that God’s overriding providence must have led him to Paul. And we know Paul’s life’s purpose is to share Christ. He witnesses to Onesimus and *WOW*, he becomes a believer.

Onesimus soon becomes Paul’s helper. Onesimus becomes Paul’s servant. Onesimus is transformed! God changes the one who was *USELESS* to *USEFUL*.

Ephesians explains God’s vision for bringing people together:

Jesus “has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility. . . His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace, and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility” (2:14b, 15b-16).

Paul is changing attitudes among diverse groups—here in particular, a master and his slave, because God’s love, when it is allowed to become central in you, affects others in a positive way.

What if this happened among members of different political parties in 2017? It is a good thing for Christians to take part in both parties because if they caught Paul’s attitude change, if they loved Jesus wholly, they could be leaders in drawing others into Christ and overcoming dividing walls of hostility.

This is how your love for God affects others.

But Paul had to persuade his friend Philemon. This attitude does not come naturally, yet it is not demanded. We must decide ourselves to let love flourish: Paul said, “I could be bold and order you to do what you should do, but instead I appeal to you on the basis of love” (v. 8-9), that is, *I prefer simply to ask you*.

He is asking Philemon to overlook bad behavior. What Philemon has experienced is like an uncooperative worker who comes in late, leaves early, calls in sick on Mondays, does not do his share of the work and steals from the company. Or, a student who never comes to class on time, never does her assignments, cheats on tests, and doesn’t care.

BUT, Onesimus has changed. His conversion was real. His change of heart transformed him.

Paul saw, not the rough draft of the natural man, but the transformed person of Christ.

Is there a person in your life that you have no hope for because the “rough draft” of the natural man (or woman) isn’t pretty? Perhaps you might pray that your love for God begins to affect them. You don’t know how God will do it, but your job is to *allow your love for God to override everything.*

Paul did not see Onesimus as useless. To Paul, he has become like a son. He hangs out at the prison—you might say he is doing prison ministry and Paul is the prisoner because soon Onesimus has totally comforted and encouraged Paul.

Onesimus has become a servant of the heart because he’s now a Christian. Onesimus changed everything due to Christ.

So Paul asked Philemon to take him back and treat him not as a slave, but as a brother, even offering to pay Onesimus’s debt. That’s love! That’s believing, “there’s no Jew or Greek, slave or free, for we are one in Christ.

“Welcome him,” Paul says. It is most important. How important? He said, “Remember, Philemon, you owe me your very self. I wish, brother, that I may have some benefit from you in the Lord that will refresh my heart in Christ” (v. 19-20).

How does your love for God affect others? Will your most difficult person have some benefit from you because you are a Christian? Will your love help him or her change?

A man named Ignatius was Bishop of Antioch in the latter part of the first century. He wrote letters to churches and one of them addressed to the church at Ephesus, mentions Onesimus. Here’s the rest of the story:

“I received [the welcome of your congregation] in the name of God through Onesimus, a man of inexpressible love, and your bishop in the flesh, whom I pray you by Jesus Christ to love, and that you would all seek to be like him. And blessed be He who has granted unto you . . . to obtain such an excellent bishop.”¹

Onesimus, a runaway, useless slave, became a useful, loving, serving, successful church leader, rising to become bishop.

How do you measure a person? By past mistakes? By their political stance? By their rough draft? When we have hope in someone who turns to Christ, when we love them with God’s love and see them as our brother in Christ, God can do amazing things. Do you expect to be different—or others to be different—because you or they are persons of faith? How much does your faith affect others?

AMEN

¹ “The Epistle of Ignatius to the Ephesians,” New Advent, Fathers of the Church at <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0104.htm>, accessed August 9, 2017.