

*Introduction:*

- A. Once upon a time, long ago, before there were restaurants or supermarkets, when people had only enough food for one day, if that, a wealthy, generous man decided to throw a banquet. A lavish meal, like no one had ever seen. The bread, he said, would be like manna from heaven, and the wine, aged from the beginning of the world. He didn't send out "Save the Date" cards. He just let people know that the banquet was coming and they were invited.

Finally everything was ready and he sent out his messengers to let everyone know. But, incredibly, even though this was a once-in-a-lifetime event, many of his guests blew him off with excuses. "I have to go see the land I just bought." "I just got married." One thing after another. **Inexcusable excuses**. So even as the tables were being set, even while the meat was slow-roasting, even as the wine was being readied, the invited guests not only insulted the host of a banquet they could never deserve, but they gave up their places at a table they could only dream of.

So the host told his servants to go out and invite people who usually begged for food, people whom no one ever invited even to share a crust—"the poor, the crippled, the blind, the lame." And they came wide-eyed into the banquet hall with their rags and crutches and tapping canes. But there were still empty places so the master sent his servants out again. "Go out and find people who don't even know me but who are hungry. Go out to the back roads and back alleys. I don't care who they are, or where they come from. Just bring them, "so that my house will be full."

- B. Jesus told that story. It's a true story in a big way. Here's another, quite like it. It is a true story, too. A man named **Philemon** lived in the city of Colossae, in what is now Turkey. He was reasonably well-off. He was good; godly, actually. The church met in his home. He had servants and among them was a man named **Onesimus**. He was a slave. Probably not the kind of slave kidnapped from a faraway

place for dehumanizing labor, but more likely an indentured servant, a man paying off his debt by working for a certain number of years. However it was, Onesimus took off. He ran away. **He didn't run to escape oppression but simply to evade responsibility. He was a fugitive and his debts were now out of his reach.**

Onesimus found his way to the anonymity of Rome, 1300 miles away. Somehow God put him in the path of Paul, a prisoner in chains. And Paul led him to faith in Christ. A prisoner leading a runaway slave to Jesus.

In all the coming clean that is part of coming to Christ, Paul learned about Onesimus's runaway background. And therein lay the dilemma. To follow Jesus, Onesimus had to set things right. But on top of that, Paul also knew *and loved* Onesimus's master, Philemon. Though Paul had not been to Colossae, he had evidently worked with Philemon somewhere along the line—maybe in the church in Ephesus. Paul didn't want to give up Onesimus because he had become both useful and beloved. But they both had to do the right thing. So Paul sent Onesimus back to Philemon, along with a letter. Turn to **Philemon**. (p.888)

- C. As we saw last week, this short letter began celebrating the culture of grace that characterized the house church there in Colossae as well as Philemon's own reputation. "*Our dear friend and fellow worker, our sister, fellow soldier.*" **V.7** says, "*You, brother, have refreshed the hearts of the Lord's people.*" And that led Paul to the point of his letter. You can almost sense Paul taking a big breath, a long pause, and then, "*Therefore...*" **vv.8-22....**
- D. That would be sheer emotional manipulation except that Paul loved Philemon and that church so much, and they knew it. And although we have no direct record of what the response was, I have no doubt that Philemon and the whole church grew richer because they took on this work of grace.
- E. I love that description of Philemon: "you have refreshed the hearts of the Lord's people." When Paul finishes his plea he says in **v.20**, "*refresh my heart in Christ.*" In our

prayer times the last couple weeks we've been reminded that God's people are to be like a river of life, flowing out of our relationship with Christ. Here is a model for us. **If we are going to be a refreshing church we must welcome those with debts they can never repay.** It's sad when people think churches are full of sanctimonious, judgmental people, and sadder when they're right. But that is not what good churches are like. That is not going to be Village Church, so this story is a case study for us.

## I. GOD SENDS US PEOPLE WHO MAY HAVE DONE A LOT OF DAMAGE IN THEIR PAST

- A. Onesimus was a violator. He had hurt people, ripped off Philemon, and gotten away with it. Here he's really coming back to take his medicine. He can hope for mercy but he has no right to it. The consequences could be very stiff.
- B. Not a few of us here have done damage to others also. Stuff we're not proud of. Things we can't really undo. Cringe-worthy, shameful things. Everyone who ever comes into a church is messy. We have all fallen far short of a claim to God's bright, holy company. We have all been takers more than givers. We've all done damage to others and broken too many of God's laws to fit an indictment.
- C. When Jesus began his work he stood up in a synagogue and read from **Is 61**...

*"The Spirit of the Lord is on me,  
because he has anointed me  
to proclaim good news to the poor.  
He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners  
and recovery of sight for the blind,  
to set the oppressed free,  
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."  
Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant  
and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue  
were fastened on him. He began by saying to  
them, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing."*

In 1 Cor. 6 Paul ran a rogue's list of sinners starting with the sexually immoral and ending with swindlers, and then he said, "And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God." <sup>11</sup>  
Cor 6:9-11] **So we're just the right company for people God brings to us who, like Onesimus, have done a lot of damage.** We're just the home for them!

When messy people come into our lives (and we're all messy)...

## II. WE MUST WELCOME THEM OUT OF LOVE, NOT DUTY

- A. This was the Apostle Paul. He had the God-given authority to command churches to do things. Even our church, nearly 2000 years later, is under the authority of his words here in the Bible. But here he says, "*I prefer to appeal to you on the basis of love.*"
- B. When we were children our parents could command us to show grace. "*Tell him you're sorry.*" "*Let your sister play, too.*" "*Be nice to Kevin.*" The Bible *does* command God's people to show grace. "*Forgive as you've been forgiven.*" "*Be kind to one another.*" "*Be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry.*" **Like children we begin our Christians lives learning to obey commands like these, because grace is just not in our nature.** Obeying shapes our spiritual instincts. But the goal is not mere obedience but love. We want to be like Jesus.
- C. Love is much more expansive and expensive than duty. Peter wrote, "*love covers a multitude of sins.*" Love is imaginative, innovative. Love "*always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.*"
- D. Illus.: A friend in a church not far from here told me that they're seeing lots of people come to Christ but so many of them are coming out of substance abuse and messed up relationships. It is bewildering and unsettling to people who've been there a long time. Like I said, even the nicest people are messy sometimes. **People are complicated and sin has given us all limps and blind spots and infections.**

Whether you meet them here, or in your family, or at work or school, love them for Jesus' sake.

### III. WELCOME OTHERS BECAUSE WE KNOW HOW GOD CAN CHANGE PEOPLE

- A. All Philemon knew of Onesimus was that he'd been worse than unreliable. He'd been a scoundrel. We're fans of *Downton Abbey* and there's this scheming servant there named Thomas Barlow. I wonder if Onesimus had been a bit like him. Had he been subtly insolent? Had some silver gone missing? Had Onesimus stirred up trouble among the others? Philemon remembered the shock of discovering he was gone. He remembered the turmoil in the household and his anger. Now Paul paints an entirely different picture: "*my son, Onesimus... useful to both you and to me... my very heart... a dear brother.*"
- B. Onesimus's very name had left a bad taste in Philemon's mouth. It meant *profitable, beneficial... useful*. Not a very apropos name for a runaway slave! So you see why Paul said what he did. In **v.11** Paul writes, "*Formerly he was useless to you, but now he has become useful both to you and to me.*" Frankly, he'd been worse than useless. He had become worthless. Then he met Christ and he not only became a decent man. **He became a useful Christian servant.** That made him useful, not only to Paul, but also to Philemon in a way that no slave could ever be. He was now someone motivated to serve Christ no matter where God put him.

Showing Christ's grace to people doesn't always produce change. The seed doesn't always fall on good soil. So it is wise to watch for the fruit before we entrust responsibility to people. **But here the fruit was obvious.** **V.13:** "*I would have liked to keep him with me so that he could take your place in helping me while I am in chains for the gospel.*" **When God changes people they go from being useless to being useful to God.**

C. There was an even deeper change. Once Onesimus had been only a slave—and a runaway slave at that. Now he had become like a son to Paul, “*my very heart.. very dear to me.*” And Paul assures Philemon that he will become like that to Philemon as well: “*even dearer to you... a brother in the Lord.*”

You remember Jesus’ story of the prodigal son whom the father welcomed home with lavish love and joy. You remember, too, the sullen elder brother, angry that such grace would be lavished on such a **ne’er-did-well**. That was the choice facing Philemon, and the church that met in his house. **Will they join the salvation party for Onesimus, the lost-son-found party, the dead-back-to-life party, or refuse to join in the extravagance of grace?**

D. Paul said in v.8 that he was making an appeal of love. He finally puts it plainly in **v.17**: “*So if you consider me a partner, welcome him as you would welcome me.*” Paul, of course, had his own terrible past. He called himself “*the chief of sinners.*” He’d persecuted the church and supervised the martyrdom of Christians. But now as an old man and missionary, Philemon and his church all owed him a debt for first bringing the gospel to their region. Imagine how he would have been welcomed!

Imagine, too, the scene when finally Onesimus stepped in the door of Philemon’s home, remembering how he’d once slipped quietly out, knowing he had no right to expect a welcome. And imagine the greeting that he *did* receive, for I am certain that Philemon and the church there responded as Paul had asked. Imagine the relief, the flood of grace—a kind of baptism of them all, an awed wonder not that Onesimus had turned his life around but that Jesus had saved him, made this runaway slave useful to Christ, and given them that inexplicable bond that Christians everywhere know when a beloved brother or sister comes home!

## Conclusion

Paul said to another church, “And such were some of you.” Jesus said, “Go out to the back roads and back alleys and compel them” —by the force of grace—“to come in, so that my house will be full.”

*Illus.:* I met Louis Dooley this week at a preaching workshop where I spoke. He is the regional director for Set Free Ministries, who have a remarkable ministry through the Emmaus Correspondence School, especially among prisoners all over the country. Louis helps these men and women come to Christ and grow through the study of the Bible.

When Louis was 19 years old, he was sentenced to life in prison for armed robbery. In county jail he was befriended—really, against his will—by Christians, who then forwarded his name to other Christians in the prison where he was held for 13 years. The Christians there pursued him and he trusted Jesus. They loved him and taught him the Bible. He took over 80 Bible correspondence courses. And then God miraculously gave him parole, and now even his parole has concluded. “*I’ve never felt so free,*” he said.

I met him because I told a friend I was preaching on Philemon. My friend said, “*You should meet Louis. Philemon is his favorite book.*”

It doesn’t really matter if the people we meet are ex-cons or pillars of the community. **If we are going to be a refreshing church we must welcome those with debts they can never repay.** It’s what we do, since we met Christ. *Illus.:* I heard of a church where people were coming to Christ right and left. They would stand and confess their sins and, to their astonishment, the church people would clap and cheer—not for the sins, of course, but for such a Savior as Jesus!