

Introduction:

A. *Illus.*: Victor Hugo's *Les Miserables* begins with Jean Valjean being enslaved for 19 years simply for stealing a loaf of bread for his sister's starving children. When he gets out he is a marked man. No one will hire him or help him, feed him or give him shelter. One night, after being refused again and again, he is taken in by a bishop who trusts him and gives him food and a place to sleep. But in the night, Valjean wakes and, seeing no hope for the future, steals the bishop's silverware and silver plates, and makes his escape.

Then next morning, just after the theft is discovered, there's a knock at the bishop's door. Three policemen are holding Valjean, dejected and overwhelmed, along with the incriminating bag of silver. In the novel, here's what happens next:

"Ah! there you are!" [the bishop] exclaimed, looking towards Jean Valjean. "I am glad to see you. But! I gave you the candlesticks too, which are of silver like the rest, and would bring two hundred francs. Why did you not take them along with your plates?"

Jean Valjean opened his eyes wide, and looked at the bishop with an expression which no human tongue can describe.

While the dumbfounded thief, Valjean, watches, the bishop assures the incredulous police that he has indeed given the silver to Jean Valjean and dismisses them.

Jean Valjean felt like a man who is just about to faint.

The bishop approached him, and said, in a low voice: "Forget not, never forget that you have promised me to use this silver to become an honest man."

Jean Valjean, who had no recollection of this promise, stood confounded. The bishop had laid much stress upon these words as he uttered them. He continued, solemnly: "Jean Valjean, my brother: you belong no longer to evil, but to good. It is your soul that I am buying for you. I withdraw it from dark thoughts and from the spirit of perdition, and I give it to God!" [pp.38-39, abridged ed.]

- B. Well, the bishop should have known that only Christ can purchase souls for God, but it is still a powerful image. In the novel, that experience of grace set Jean Valjean's life in a whole new direction. Henceforward, he really does "*belong to good.*" He becomes like the bishop, sacrificing greatly throughout his life to show grace to those whose lives are miserable.
- C. I thought of that story while reading the little NT book of *Philemon.* Please turn there. There's a short background summary in your bulletin. In this letter we get a glimpse of the investment Paul made in Onesimus, the runaway slave, and the investment he hopes Onesimus's former master, Philemon, will continue to make in this young man who had left him high and dry. And remember that this letter was not only written to Philemon but also "*to the church that meets in your home.*" **This is a message for all Christians entrusted with the costly work of grace.**
- D. God brings people to Village Church who need to see God's grace. Some need to know just how forgiving Jesus is. Some need to know that being a Christian isn't all about working harder and doing more. Some need the family they've never had. **They all need us to be *home.***
- E. When I was new here, over 17 years ago, I prayed that God would help us to be a model church—that students and others would come here and see a way of doing church that they would take with them for life; spreading to the churches where they would go as lay leaders, pastors, missionaries, and professors. The problem was, I didn't know quite what it was we were to model. Now it is clear to me. **Together, we are to embody the grace and peace of Christ so that we become a home—a family and refuge—for people God brings into our lives.**

Illus.: **Angus and Helen Chrichton** wrote us, "*You did indeed put your fingerprints on us in so many different ways. Above all you showed us what Christian community looks like. We arrived bruised and damaged. We left refreshed and re-envisioned to serve the Lord. The years subsequently have delivered further blows and I honestly*

think we would have gone under if it was not for the harbour from the storms that VCL gave us our two years with you.” **To nurture “bruised and damaged” people we need to be skilled in God’s grace.** And Philemon helps us with that.

I. REMEMBER: GOD’S GRACE AND PEACE ARE OUR FAMILY’S BEST QUALITIES

- A. In v.3 Paul greeted Philemon as he normally greeted fellow believers: “Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” God’s grace and God’s peace are the gifts of Jesus Christ to all who put their faith in him. Then *grace and peace* become our currency and culture. Here it is as though Paul makes a deposit of more, and in turn he will ask them to up their spending of grace and peace.

Grace is getting what you don’t deserve and could never earn. God’s grace brings unconditional forgiveness and an unbreakable bond with the Lord. God’s grace brings us gifts and treasures, Christlike character, a family, immortality, and an everlasting home with the Lord Jesus Christ. Peace begins when we are reconciled to the God we’d sinned against, and then moves into our lives like summer wind, quieting our minds and hearts, even when death sends its summons. God’s peace is our medicine against fear and our comfort in trouble and sorrow.

- B. Grace and peace come to us as freely as Paul’s blessing. We never earn them. They are our birthright in Christ and they are refreshed constantly as we give and receive them to one another. It is as if we can give infusions of grace and peace to others because Christ keeps giving those qualities to us. Remember the story of the **poor widow’s oil jar?** God worked a miracle so that no matter how many other jars and pots and bowls she filled, her little jar never ran out. God’s grace and peace are like that in us. Give more and we’ll have more.
- C. So when God brings people into our lives and church we are ready for them. We are supplied with all we need of

Christ. We have his grace and peace. If you come to church for something else, if receiving and pouring out grace and peace are not why you're here, all our worship will be so much ash and all our songs but dropped cymbals.

D. Remember: God's grace and peace are our family's best qualities.

Onesimus had not been trustworthy. In fact, he'd been a scoundrel and disgrace; worse than useless. He had burned Philemon, stolen from him; left him in the lurch, and now he was coming back to try to make things right. It was iffy. But Paul sent a very strong reference: Onesimus *"became my son while I was in chains. ... he has become useful both to you and to me. ... So welcome him as you would welcome me."* **We often pick up where others have left off.** It is our privilege to help those who come to us grow in their usefulness to Christ. So...

II. WE TRUST GOD TO MAKE HIS SERVANTS USEFUL

A. That's what Paul asked of Philemon. He assured Philemon that Onesimus would become both useful and dear to him. *This guy will grow on you, Philemon. Soon you won't know what you'd do without him.* We've had so many people like that here, not only students who come, but our own kids who grow up in this congregation, as well as young believers of all ages whom the Lord has entrusted to us. **We put up with some foolishness and failures because we believe God will make them useful.** Jesus Christ not only saves people; he develops them by his Spirit into servants of God. And he uses us to do that. *Illus.:* I used to have a pin with this string of letters on it. We could give one to everyone whom God sends us. It was an abbreviation for, ***Please be patient. God is not finished with me yet.***

B. This short story also reminds me that we are in league with other believers in other churches to develop those who come here. Paul was handing Onesimus off to Philemon and the church in Colossae. I sometimes wonder how many other congregations—how many other parents and pastors, mentors and models—stand behind all you who sit before me on Sunday mornings. A vast cloud of witnesses who

have entrusted to us those they've poured their hearts into. And so often we send them out again to other church homes. *Illus.*: When I was being considered for this church almost 18 years ago someone from the search committee called one of my references. Tom had heard that there had been trouble in this church and he was protective of me. He answered the caller's questions and then he said in his sternest voice, *"If you call this man you'd better take good care of him!"* I've think of that as people go out from Village Church to other places. *We've done our best with this person. Now please take good care of them. Keep grace going.*

- C. There's another dynamic of grace at work here. **Vv.15-16**: *"Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back forever—no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother."* If we didn't know better, we'd think that Onesimus had missed his train or got lost in the crowd. *"He was separated from you."* But he had run away, for Pete's sake! But through running away from Philemon Onesimus met Christ. It makes you wonder why God didn't just arrange for Onesimus to come to Christ in Philemon's own house. Would've saved a lot of time, trouble and travel. But God worked through this complex story for the good of all three main characters: Paul, Onesimus, and Philemon.

To do the work of grace, we have to trust God's sovereignty. We work with what God gives us. God has been working in these lives long before we came into the picture and will continue long after. **We never know what grace of ours he will use in their lives.** When it comes to the ways God works, things are not always what they seem.

There was another interesting little lesson here. Listen to **vv.17-21**... Many believe that suggests that Onesimus not only ran away but that he stole from Philemon on the way out the door. How in the world would Paul repay anything?! He was a prisoner with no income! But we see his request: *Wipe the slate clean for Onesimus, as Christians do. ... Give him the candlesticks, too.*

III. THE ONLY DEBT WE KEEP ON THE BOOKS IS OUR DEBT TO LOVE ONE ANOTHER FOR CHRIST'S SAKE

A. Back in v.8 Paul wrote, *"I appeal to you on the basis of love."* As he wraps up his appeal, he points to Philemon's spiritual debt and asks, *"refresh my heart in Christ."* That's what we put in our spiritual budget: *refreshments*. That's our major expenditure here. That's also what we spend on the unsaved people around us. Through the living water of Christ within us, we want to refresh them. Grace, of course, is expensive. It costs us to forgive, to serve, to be patient and kind. It costs us to pray for one another and to bear one another's burdens. And then, to forget the debt.

Here's a grace principle: **fresh starts refresh hearts.**

Remember that with children who get on your nerves, with students who are still learning, with people old enough to be better than they are, with people who let us down. **Fresh starts refresh hearts.**

B. Do you see how this letter ends? Instead of *"Sincerely yours"* Paul concludes with, *"The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit."* Philemon was going to need it, and so was the whole church there, because Onesimus, the runaway slave, was coming back, newborn and useful, for a change. True to his name. And it was up to them to show him grace. It is up to us also. All the time, wherever we go, gracing people for Jesus' sake.

Illus.: I think I've told you before about this guy Jim in our previous church. He was this retired guy who had come to Christ in his 60s and loved Jesus so much. He loved being an usher. The part he loved most came *after* church when everyone was leaving. He'd fill his jacket pockets with Smarties and give them to all the kids. They'd swarm around him. *"Here you go, sweetheart,"* he said. He'd giggle and tease. *"Here's one for you, sonny."* I wrote, *"Grace isn't candy, I know, but that is a wonderful picture for pastors. [For every believer, of course.] Grace isn't always about sin. Grace is God's favor lavished on those who couldn't get their hands on it by themselves. Meet people with your pockets bulging with grace."*

Conclusion:

When the bishop gave the candlesticks to Jean Valjean an epic life of grace began. At the very end of the book, after a lifetime of heroic and redemptive love, Jean Valjean dies, surrounded by those young people he had loved. *“He had fallen backwards, the light from the candlesticks fell upon him; his white face looked up towards heaven.”* [p.333] Of course, that was just a novel. But **with Christ there’s no limit to what grace can accomplish, no limit to what it will make of us.**

Illus.: I began with a story of a bishop and I’ll end with one. Around 100 A.D., the bishop of Antioch (where Jesus’ disciples were first called Christians) was a man named **Ignatius**. He was imprisoned for his faith in Christ and sent to Rome to face the wild beasts in the Coliseum. He was martyred there in around 107 A.D.

At one stop on his journey to Rome, the church in Ephesus sent a delegation with their bishop to encourage Ignatius. Soon after, Ignatius wrote them a letter, which still survives. He thanked them for sending their bishop *“whose love surpasses words... I pray that you may love him with a love according to Jesus Christ, and that you may all be like him.”*

That bishop, you may have guessed, was named Onesimus. No one knows for sure if it is the same Onesimus, but the timing fits, and the bishop of Ephesus before him was Timothy, another spiritual son of Paul. Not only that, but many scholars believe that the first time the letters of Paul were collected was around 100 A.D. in Ephesus... where Bishop Onesimus led the church. Which could explain how this little gem of a letter that changed the life of a slave named Onesimus found its way into the Scriptures.

At Village Church we want to touch those whom God brings us with the grace of Christ. We want to leave fingerprints of his grace. After that, who knows what God will do! **With Christ there’s no limit to what grace can accomplish.**