

Introduction:

- A. *Illus.*: I have a couple different coffee shops I hang out at. One of my favorites is owned by a wife and husband. Everything is fresh-baked every morning. The coffee is great. The place is clean and quiet. Great customer service. They let me sit in the back corner and read even before the store is officially open for business. I was sitting there one morning, the only person in the place, listening to them get things up and running and I realized something. I was struck by their courtesy and kindness with one another. **I realized that I like that peacefulness, that grace, even more than I do their homemade muffins.**
- B. Here at Village Church we want to do things well: worship services, educational methods, care of our building, wise leadership. But there is something deeper and unseen that really determines the health of our church. Do we show grace to each other. Do we forgive when we're wronged? Do we accept those who have alienated themselves? Do we bless those who don't deserve it? Twelve times the New Testament says, "*Love one another.*" Twelve times. And anyone who has been around any church for any length of time knows that if you're going to love one another it takes a lot of forgiveness and grace. **Grace is the hidden essential if our church is to leave our spiritual fingerprints on the people God brings us.**
- C. There's an interesting little example in the New Testament. In the young church of Colossae there was a Christian man named **Philemon**. He was a leader. He had some means. And among his household had been a slave named **Onesimus**. A slave in that culture wasn't always like the brutal, dehumanizing slavery we think of today. Many slaves then were more like indentured servants. Tim Keller writes that many slaves "*lived normal lives and were paid the going wage, but were not allowed to quit or change employers, and were in slavery an average of ten years.*" Whatever the case, Philemon's slave, Onesimus, had run

away. He may have also stolen from Philemon. It was a costly crime and I think it rocked and disturbed Philemon greatly. Then Onesimus disappeared into the vast Roman Empire.

But God works in mysterious ways and somehow that runaway slave crossed paths with the slave of Christ, the Apostle Paul, who was a prisoner. It was probably in Rome. And wouldn't you know it: Paul brought Onesimus to faith in Jesus. The old man and the young runaway developed a deep relationship. In fact, Paul thought of Onesimus as a son and Onesimus was a great help to Paul.

But there was this problem. Onesimus was on the lam. He was a wanted man. And the man he had walked out on was a fellow believer. Not only that, he was a man Paul knew and loved. What to do?

- D. Paul decided to send him back and Onesimus agreed to go, but Paul also sent a personal letter to Philemon, all but begging him to show grace to his former slave. In this short letter Paul not only pleads with Philemon to show grace; he pleads with us as well. **The first seven verses don't mention the problem, but they certainly prepare us for the solution**. In just a few sentences he reminds Philemon and us just what it means to be people of God's grace. The first reason is in **vv.1-3...**

I. WE ARE MUCH MORE TO EACH OTHER THAN CHURCH ATTENDERS (vv.1-3)

- A. Look again at the first words: "Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus." Paul begins almost all his letters identifying his position of authority: "*Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ.*" But here, despite his urgency, Paul did not appeal to his authority. Notice this too: legally speaking, Paul was a prisoner of *Rome* but he didn't see it that way. Of course, if he puts it that way, I guess we are prisoners of Christ too. *Slaves*, actually. Bought with a price. So we really have no choice but to do what he asks, and everything Jesus asks of us always involves grace.

- B. You couldn't miss all the different ways Paul describes the relationships here—*brother, our dear friend and fellow worker, our sister, our fellow soldier*. Most think Apphia was Philemon's wife and Archippus may have been his adult son because it seems they were all part of the same household. **But these wonderful, affectionate terms are still used by Christians today.** *Brother and sister* speaks of our shared kinship in Christ, all of us children of the heavenly Father. *Dear friend and fellow worker*—we have those people here, don't we? We've worked shoulder to shoulder. Prayed with one another. Discussed and debated how to do the Lord's work well. *Fellow soldier* speaks of our shared battles against enemies of the gospel.
- C. *"And to the church that meets in your home."* Paul pictured the Colossian Christians gathered there under Philemon's roof each week. He saw their faces, heard their singing in his mind, remembered times shared. It is interesting that this very personal letter to Philemon was also *"to the church."* Philemon would read what Paul asked of him, with everyone listening. I suppose that they all had opinions about what to do with a runaway slave, Christian or not. But now they heard Paul's plea for grace they would all watch what Philemon would do.
- D. Then **in v.3** Paul gives his familiar blessing: *"Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ."* It is an abbreviated form of Aaron's blessing: *"The Lord bless you and keep you... The Lord be gracious to you... and give you peace."* It was a reminder of their God-given birthright: grace and peace. The implication being, *God's grace and peace are the currency of the church. They are how the church does business.* So you see what I mean: **We are much more to each other here than fellow attenders.**

V.4-5... Here's another motivation for showing grace:

II. GOD HAS BOUND US TOGETHER IN CHRIST (vv.4-5)

- A. As he so often does in his letters, Paul begins by telling Philemon that he thanks God for him, and prays for him. It is *what* he thanks God for that we want to note especially: *“your love for all his holy people and your faith in the Lord Jesus.”* Of all the innumerable gifts we receive from God as believers, these entwined blessings are the very best. Nothing God gives us is so miraculous, so beyond our own ability or inclinations, as these: *loving God’s people and trusting in the Lord Jesus.* Nothing has enriched Village Church so much as those entwined gifts.
- B. To be clear, Paul thanks God because we wouldn’t love each other nor trust Christ without God doing the heavy lifting. It’s our responsibility and duty to do these things but they’re only possible because God loved us first, and gave Christ to die for us and the Holy Spirit to enliven us. These are the things that set us apart from all other people.
- C. So when our love and faith grow, God is to be praised all the more. For example, if someone hears of our intention to give a day to worship and fasting, to seeking God’s will for our church, I hope they don’t say, *“Good for you! You guys are great!”* What they certainly should say is, *“Thank God for that! He must really be at work among you!”*

SUMMARY: So, like Philemon, a church that brings praise to God for their loving unity and faith in Christ—which Village Church does—is well-positioned for the costly work of Christlike forgiveness and blessing.

V.6 is very difficult to translate. It helps to remember that Paul wants to persuade Philemon, who is already a very godly man, to show extraordinary grace to Onesimus. *“I pray that your partnership [Gr. koinonia; sharing, fellowship] with us in the faith may be effective in deepening your understanding of every good thing we share for the sake of Christ.”* Paul is praying and saying that his relationship with Philemon—which he is about to test—would ultimately result in Philemon growing even richer in Christ.

As we will see next week Paul pulls out all the stops to persuade Philemon to welcome Onesimus back without penalty. Judging from how hard Paul pleads we can assume that this was a very difficult thing to expect. Onesimus's behavior had done a great deal of damage and deserved the sternest penalties. His becoming a Christian didn't change any of that.

But Paul says, *I am praying that you'll trust our bond in Christ enough to do what I'm going to ask you—to welcome Onesimus back, not as a slave, but as a dear brother.* Remember, Paul doesn't demand this as an apostle. He appeals to him as a brother. We face this same kind of decision when relationships are hurt.

III. WHEN WE ARE GENEROUS WITH GRACE WE GROW RICHER IN CHRIST (v.6)

There are two simple things that stand out to me:

- A. We must admonish our fellow believers to reach far in grace to one another. When we see trouble between believers we cannot ignore it. We need to help one another see what mercy requires; to see what Jesus would do. We cannot take sides. We must be agents of God's grace and peace. So we say, *“Brother, I know you were wronged, but you need to let this go for Jesus' sake. Sister, you need to take the first step here. Why don't you talk to her?”*
- B. But even more important that helping someone face the responsibility of grace is to **pray for them**, as Paul did here. We pray because God can change our hearts. God can soften our ache for justice over mercy. **God makes Christians Christlike in answer to prayer.**
- C. This week when you're praying, explore if there is anyone who you need to show grace. And pray for any brother or sister you know, especially here at VCL, who is struggling with that. These quiet struggles over mercy ultimately have much more to do with the health of a church than what songs we sing or how welcoming our foyer is.

V.7...

IV. REFRESHING BELIEVERS ARE READY FOR THE CHALLENGES OF GREATER GRACE

- A. Philemon's love for his fellow believers brought "great joy and encouragement" to Paul and had "refreshed the hearts of the Lord's people." This man built people up. He was like a father to that church. Every church I've ever been in has had people like Philemon, Apphia and Archippus. When you think of that church, you think of that person; that couple or family. If you're far away and meet someone from the church, almost the first thing you ask is, "And how is Philemon? Is he still there? I love that guy."
- B. I'm sure there are Christians in your life whose love for others gives you "great joy and encouragement." **And I think many of you are like that.** I was aware of that when I prayed with so many of you this spring. I'd sit there with you and the Lord and I'd realize particular ways in which you encouraged me and others in the church. Without exception, God's grace was evident in your lives. In every case I was encouraged.
- C. Paul's implication is that just as Philemon has been a joy and an encouragement to so many in the past, now he will be asked to do so again in an especially difficult way. *Please forgive the man who wronged you. I pray you'll see how profitable he has become to you, to the church, and to me—Paul—because he gave his life to Christ.*
- D. Is there someone like that in your life? Someone who has taken advantage of you, someone here perhaps who has not behaved as they should? **If there isn't right now, there will be!** Will you draw on the grace and peace of God in Christ? Will you lay hold of God's merciful help and servant of your brother or sister?

Conclusion

These often unseen tests of grace are how Christians leave the fingerprints of Christ on others. Brothers and sisters, fellow servants and soldiers, partners in Christ, **love one another. Love one another. Love one another.**