

From Useless to Useful

Philemon 8-11

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November 8-9, 2025

Last weekend, we began a series on the Book of Philemon called, “The Gospel Changes Everything.” We learned how the Apostle Paul appealed to Philemon to receive and restore his runaway slave Onesimus: *When we’re gripped by the grace of the gospel, our hearts overflow with love for God’s people.* Paul wanted him to do the right thing, not because he had to, but because he wanted to. As a result, he appealed to his relationship with Philemon and affirmed what he saw him doing right.

Paul continues his appeal to Philemon in verses 8-11: ***“Accordingly, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do what is required, yet for love’s sake I prefer to appeal to you—I, Paul, an old man and now a prisoner also for Christ Jesus—I appeal to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I became in my imprisonment. (Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful to you and to me.)”***

Here’s our main idea: *The gospel reshapes our identity and restores our usefulness.*

1. An appeal from forbearance. Verse 8 begins with the word, ***“accordingly,”*** which can be translated as *“therefore.”* Since Philemon was known for his love for others and for refreshing the saints, it’s time for him to refresh Onesimus. Paul makes his appeal for forbearance based on three things.

- **Love.** He could have commanded Philemon to do something, but instead he states, ***“yet for love’s sake I prefer to appeal to you.”*** This literally reads, *“for the sake of the love”* and could refer to Christ’s love for Philemon, Philemon’s love for Christ, Paul’s love for Philemon, or Paul’s love for Onesimus. Instead of pulling rank, Paul appeals from relationship. I’m reminded of the classic English proverb: *“A man convinced against his will is of the same opinion still.”* He could have laid down the law, but he exhorts out of love. Romans 13:8 says, ***“Owe no man anything but to love each other, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law.”***

The word ***“appeal”*** means, *“to call to one’s side; to exhort, encourage, plead, and beseech.”* It can also be translated as, *“to ask on bended knee”* and comes with a sense of urgency. 2 Corinthians 6:1 says: ***“We appeal to***

you not to receive the grace of God in vain.” Hebrews 13:19 reads, ***“I urge you the more earnestly...”***

I talked to a believer who attends another church this week and he told me he has been very burdened for his married daughter who lives in another state because she hasn't been going to church. He found himself getting frustrated because she knows better and wanted to sit her down and confront her. As he prayed about it, he realized the better approach was to make a loving appeal to her and to pray that God would bring others into her life who go to church. He smiled and told me that she's now going to church! He's thankful now that he didn't confront her.

- **Longevity.** In the middle of verse 9, he appeals to his old age: ***“I, Paul, an old man...”*** Commentators believe Paul was over 60 years old and was likely frail because of his fetters and all the trials he had been through. In Paul's day, older men were considered wise and authoritative. The KJV renders it like this: *“the aged.”* Job 12:12 says, ***“Wisdom is with the aged, and understanding in length of days.”***

We can all learn from those who have walked with Christ longer than we have. Speaking of that, I recommend watching or listening to the podcast I did this week with Pastor Ed, who served on the Edgewood staff for over 45 years! We also have an Intentional Discipleship program where we match up those who are older in their faith with those who are just starting out.

- **Life.** Paul is in a place in his life where he cannot minister in person: ***“...and now a prisoner also for Christ Jesus.”*** He had suffered a lot to bring the gospel to the lost, which included Philemon and his family. He's old and helpless because he's in prison and wants Philemon to heed his last request. One pastor writes, *“Paul knows Philemon is facing a huge dilemma. Onesimus committed a couple felonies, crimes punishable by death. If Philemon pursues reconciliation with Onesimus, it's going to cost him financially and emotionally, and it may cost his reputation, too...Paul is saying he knows all about cost...because he's held captive because of his faith...but Paul is also saying, ‘But I can assure you, it will be worth it all when we see our Master, Jesus Christ.’”*

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2. An appeal from family relationships. When we come to Christ, we become related to each other as members of a new spiritual family. We see this in verse 10: ***“I appeal to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I became in my imprisonment.”*** Literally, this reads, *“for my own child”* and in the original, the name Onesimus is placed at the end of the sentence. Paul wanted to establish that Onesimus was now a fellow follower of Jesus. By describing him as his spiritual child, Paul was emphasizing that his runaway slave was now his redeemed sibling.

He was being tactful since this was probably the first time Philemon had heard about Onesimus since he ran away.

Paul magnified his appeal to Philemon by reminding him that he had the joy of leading Onesimus to Christ. It was common for Paul to refer to those who were saved under his ministry in a father/son relationship.

- 1 Timothy 1:2: ***“To Timothy, my true child in the faith.”***
- Titus 1:4: ***“To Titus, my true child in a common faith.”***
- 1 Corinthians 4:4-5: ***“For though you have countless guides in Christ, you do not have many fathers. For I became your father in Christ Jesus through the gospel.”***

Don't miss this. Onesimus was a Gentile slave from the very dregs of Roman society. On top of that, he was from a region noted for vice and debauchery. And yet Paul calls him his child. Incidentally, it's likely that Paul also led Philemon to Christ according to Philemon 19: ***“...to say nothing of your owing me even your own self.”*** Essentially, Paul's appeal goes something like this (we'll learn more about this next weekend): *Since you and Onesimus are my spiritual children, that means you are spiritual brothers in Christ and therefore need to be reconciled.*

I like how one person says it: *“Jesus Christ changes lives. He can take a useless, unprofitable, good for nothing person and make the most useful, profitable, and good person imaginable.”*

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3. An appeal from fruitfulness. We can forbear with other believers because we are in the same family, and we're called to bear fruit for our Father. We see this in verse 11: ***“(Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful to you and to me.)”*** The word ***“formerly”*** refers to how Onesimus lived in the past as Philemon's slave. To be ***“useless”*** means, *“unprofitable, ineffective, idle, lazy, and*

worthless.” It’s likely Onesimus was a slacker and since he ran away, he cost Philemon even more money. We also believe he stole from Philemon. We can infer this from verse 18: ***“If he has wronged you at all, or owes you anything, charge that to my account.”***

Paul is using a clever play on words here. The name Onesimus means, “*useful*.” When he served as a slave, he was considered “*useless*.” But “**now**” that he is a born-again believer with a new Master, he is “*useful*” to both Paul and Philemon as a fruitful brother involved in kingdom work. In verse 13, Paul said, ***“I would have been glad to keep him with me, in order that he might serve me on your behalf during my imprisonment for the gospel.”*** Paul also gives a shout out to Onesimus in Colossians 4:19: ***“And with him Onesimus, our faithful and beloved brother, who is one of you.”*** The once unprofitable slave became profitable because Onesimus was now serving a greater Master, the Lord Jesus Christ.

I also think of a guy named John Mark who bailed on Paul during one of his missionary journeys. Paul struggled to trust him after that, but through the influence of Barnabas, Mark was restored to usefulness. Interestingly, in Philemon 24, he is called a “*fellow worker*.” In 2 Timothy 4:11, we read these words: ***“Get Mark and bring him with you, for he is very useful to me for ministry.”*** When grace gets ahold of a life, even what once seemed wasted can become wonderfully useful again.

- God can take your mess and turn it into a message.
- God loves to turn rebellious sinners into redeemed saints.
- God loves to change us from foes to friends.
- God loves to free us from living as slaves to sin to become servants of the Savior.
- God loves to reshape our identity and restore our usefulness.

There’s two key words in this verse: “**Formerly**” and “**now**.” He *was* useless, but *now* he is useful. 1 Corinthians 6:11: ***“And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.”***

I’m reminded of these lyrics from a song by Brandon Heath: *“I wish you could see me now, I wish I could show you how; I’m not who I was.”*

On Wednesday of this week, I hung out with the 4th grade boy I mentor at Youth Hope. This is my second year with him. When we began, one of the school counselors came up front and gave him a shout-out for being a man of valor in a situation in his classroom. This was the first time he had received any recognition like that. When the leader said a quick prayer for lunch, he responded by saying, *“That was short.”*

I was prompted by the Spirit to ask him if he ever prays, and he said he prays long prayers. I was surprised so I asked him when he started doing that, and he said it’s been since he’s been coming to Youth Hope’s after school program. I decided to go deeper and asked him if he has put his faith in Jesus. He smiled and said, *“Yes.”* When I asked him when he did this, he said it was recently through Youth Hope. I see a huge change in him, and others are recognizing it as well. He is not who he was, all because of Jesus!

John Newton, the former slave trader, who wrote *Amazing Grace*, wrote these words near the end of his life: *“I am not what I ought to be. I am not what I want to be. I am not what I hope to be. But still, I am not what I used to be. And by the grace of God, I am what I am.”*

Can you imagine the scene when Onesimus traveled with Tychicus to deliver this personal letter from Paul to Philemon? Paul sets this up in verse 12: ***“I am sending him back to you, sending my very heart.”***

After one of the services last weekend, Mindy LaBerge recommended a children’s book based on the Book of Philemon called, *“Twice Freed”* by Patricia St. John. That’s at my reading level, so I ordered it this week and read it. I found it so compelling that I couldn’t put it down. It would be a great book for you to read and then read to your children or grandchildren. We’ve ordered some copies for the Café Resource Center.

I was struck by this section describing what may have happened within Onesimus when they neared Philemon’s house with the letter: *“Brother Tychicus, you go on alone. I will wait here under the tree. Tell Master Philemon that I have come, repentant, forgiven by Christ, to return to my slavery and to hear what punishment he thinks meet to inflict.”*

A few minutes later, Philemon appeared with a parchment in his hand. Onesimus rose to meet him and then bowed himself to the ground. Philemon gently said, *“Rise. We counted you as dead and mourned for you. I presume you took the*

money and fled to Rome. Tell me, why have you returned?” Onesimus answered, “To confess and atone for my sin, which is greater than you know; to restore what I can of your gold, and to put myself once again into your hands, as your slave and property, to do what you will with me...”

Philemon answered, “You did well. Be seated, and you too, my son Archippus. I have a letter from our dear father in Christ, Paul. Let us read it together.” It was very quiet on the hillside. Even the lambs seemed to have stopped their bleating as the gracious words that have survived the centuries fell for the first time into the amazed ears of the guilty slave: “Paul, a prisoner of our Lord Jesus Christ...unto Philemon our dearly-beloved...I beseech thee for my son Onesimus...who in time past was to thee unprofitable, but now profitable to thee and to me...receive him not now as a servant, but above a servant, a brother beloved...receive him as myself...”

“So, this is a letter of emancipation,” said Philemon with a smile. “Onesimus, I grant you your pardon and freedom for Christ’s sake. You shall enter my house, not as a slave, but as a brother in Christ, truly now TWICE FREED.”

It’s so good for us to hear how the gospel changes everything, isn’t? I want to ask Todd Mortonson to come up and share how God has been at work in his life.

Todd Mortonson Testimony

My name is Todd Mortonson. I am married to Claire who is a wonderful woman and I am glad to do life with her. I am a believer in Christ who is in recovery and struggles with anxiety, depression, worry, negative thinking, food issues, codependency and other life issues.

To begin with, I will share about the beginning of my life. I should not actually be here because when I was born my mom was told I would not make it through the night. Praise God, I did make it through the night, but the doctors said I would never walk or talk or do anything. By God’s grace I am here.

Before recovery the insanity of my life included doing the same thing over and over again expecting the same result. Continuing to get stuck in my own ways. I would come to Celebrate Recovery (CR) and purely serve. My main focus was serving in the kitchen. I would then participate in worship and listen to the message and leave. Through this time, I knew I had problems and thought there are not any people who can help me. That it is only between me and God, and I

am not “one of those people.” I felt more insecure and weighed down and did not want to invite others into my struggles and burden them. I did not want to cause someone else to struggle if they are struggling with the same thing.

I think others can relate to different aspects to what I struggle with. Sometimes, I am just very anxious and have depressed feelings about life which I know I am not alone in those thoughts or feelings. I am continually reminded that everyone can relate to someone on something and that nobody is perfect.

Previously I thought my relationship with God was fine but honestly, I was not getting in the word and praying as often as I was capable of. I always felt connected to God but did not always own the relationship and contribute as maybe I should. What would outweigh my time with the Lord was getting too into my own thoughts and feelings where I was not honoring God or even myself with those thoughts and feelings.

I had a good attitude towards others. Sometimes I would get consumed thinking about what others thought of me which in turn would make me isolate myself and think negatively. I would also question do others judge me.

At some of my lowest points, I did not want to see people or be around them. Starting in 2020, I started over exercising and participating in severe food restrictions. Everything just felt like it was compounding and compounding. I internalized continued pain and disappointment. I escaped pain through procrastination and distraction. Different people were worried about me and respectfully shared their concerns. Over time I realized, with good counsel, that I had more problems than I thought but at the same time realized I was not alone.

Getting into recovery included the start of going to the life issues open share groups somewhere in 2020 to 2021. I was challenged to take part in a 12-step group that started in 2022 and ended in 2023. In parallel with attending the life issues open share group at Celebrate Recovery, I was being counseled by a pastor, working through concepts of finding my worth in Christ, beginning to tackle negative thoughts and thinking and learning how to change that to positive self-talk.

My relationship with Jesus Christ allowed me to realize I had a problem. Coming to terms that if Jesus is truly Lord of my life than I cannot do it on my own. That I need to rely on Christ and allow others to hold me accountable with what is going on.

With others I am more understanding, open and vulnerable. I understand more what it means to be accountable and how to hold others accountable well. I have improved my outlook on how I need to see myself and how God sees me. Understanding this has shown me that God and people do not see the imperfections I see. They do not see the “would ofs,” “could ofs,” “should ofs.” They are not judging me or thinking negatively towards me. Others and God just see me as Todd.

I would say nothing I struggle with is completely gone. What I can say is that I do not think I am as hard on myself as I used to be which feels fantastic. I can say I am getting more comfortable being around more people. I enjoy having another community I can go to, now my CR specific community in parallel with my church/small group community. Overall, I have lessened a lot of things and I am not as negative as I used to be. I feel more confident just in who I am as a person. My decision making has improved because I know more of who I am in Christ and as a person.

Walking with the Lord has changed because I am more aware of what I am doing and not doing, thinking to myself is this glorifying God what I am doing. I am stepping up more to be involved in CR leadership, specifically wanting to serve God for His glory. On a personal level I am trying to get in the Word more. In regard to praying, I off and on pray more individually and I am a leader praying with my wife on daily basis.

A couple of my life verses are Galatians 2:20 and Romans 8:1. Galatians 2:20, “I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.” To me this verse means giving your life to Christ that you are denying yourself, your flesh. I am not living for myself but something greater. Similar to taking up your cross daily and following Him. It is not a one-time thing once you give your life to Christ. I need to continue to walk in that and give things over to Christ every day and honestly multiple times a day. Romans 8:1, “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.” The verse impacts me just knowing that those who are in Christ are saved and that I know my eternal destination.

I am thankful that Jesus paid it all and took my place. By God’s grace, I have gone from feeling useless to knowing I am useful to my Master.

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Do you feel crumpled and stepped on, worthless and useless, and want to just run away? It's time to serve a new Master and learn how the gospel can reshape your identity and restore your usefulness.

Prayer of Surrender/Gospel Invitation