

Modern Family 6

Oct. 13/14, 2012: “Useful” - The Runaway Slave

Philemon

(Women’s Retreat)

Introduction

More people are enslaved today than any time in history.

If I was a slave, I would like to think I would escape. I know that wouldn’t be easy, but I would hope and pray to find a way.

If I was fortunate enough to escape, I would never want to go back to that place. I would run, change my identity, and keep quiet. I would find a big city in another country where I could blend in and hide.

There is a fascinating story in the Bible about a slave who does that very thing. He ends up on an adventure that he would never have dreamed of.

I’m going to tell you this true story and out of it we will discover some very practical things about relationships with one another.

Acts 19:10 tells us that for two years the Apostle Paul preached in a lecture hall in a city in the Roman Empire called Ephesus (in modern day Turkey), so that “all the Jews and Greeks who lived in the province of Asia (not the Asia we think of) heard the word of the Lord.” There in Ephesus, many were healed and many churches were planted in the surrounding region.

Philemon (“Phil”) was a wealthy businessman, living in Colossae, with his wife, and his son. He had a large estate, and like nearly all wealthy Greeks, he had slaves who worked his estate. A major highway linked his city to Ephesus, 100 miles away.

It is believed that Philemon met Paul during his two years of ministry in Ephesus. He became a Christian, and became friends with Paul. Paul discipled Philemon as a leader.

When Phil returns home he works with Epaphras and the other Colossian Christians and begins hosting the church gatherings in his own house.

One of Phil's slaves is named Onesimus. His name means useful, and as a slave he was useful to his owner. He was someone's property -- one of 10 million slaves in the Roman Empire-- 1/6 of the population. Slaves comprised 40% of the population of the city of Rome. (According to the 2012 reports on human trafficking, 27 million are in slavery today.) Onesimus had been planning his escape for a long time. Recently his owner's life and family had changed radically. He heard them talking about a man named Paul and a man named Jesus who were responsible for the changes. He heard stories about Paul being a miracle worker and he noticed the change in his owner. He also had overheard their discussions and gatherings in the "house church" that met there. Phil had grown softer with these changes – more lax than he had been in the past and Onesimus took advantage of that.

Onesimus steals a sizable amount of money and escapes.

This is a risky thing to do. Philemon, as a slave owner, could kill him if he is caught. That is his right. Onesimus makes a 1200 mile journey, which under good circumstances would have taken about two months. He conceals his identity. He travels over land and across the Mediterranean Sea, eventually ending up in the city of Rome.

With a disguised identity, he decides to find Paul – the one Philemon had met in Ephesus – the miracle worker and the life changer. He had heard that Paul was in the city and he wants to meet him. Paul is in the city as a prisoner, under house arrest, awaiting trial in Rome – a time during which he was able to write, to occasionally preach, and have visitors. His imprisonment there lasted two years.

Onesimus comes to Paul, meets with him and Paul shares the gospel with him. He listens. He asks questions. He hears the story of Paul the murderer – a killer of Christians, now being used to change world. Accepted by God and transformed. Onesimus tells Paul his story -- that he is an escaped slave, and a thief. Paul prays with Onesimus and he becomes a Christian.

He starts serving alongside Paul, being discipled, and learning. Paul sees great potential in Onesimus – He is living up to his name, being useful to Paul and his ministry.

After trust is built, Onesimus spills the beans and tells Paul that he wasn't just a slave – he was a

slave of Paul's friend, Philemon.

Paul's jaw drops open. "Are you serious? What a small world we live in!"

Paul knows that legally he is supposed to report Onesimus and have him sent back to Philemon. Paul is already under arrest and this could get him into worst trouble. But he fears for Onesimus. He is between two people whom he deeply cares about.

He believes in Onesimus's calling. If this thing from his past isn't cleared up, he might not have a future.

His past just might catch up with him. It depends on what they do.

It's risky, but they come up with a plan. Paul decides to send Onesimus back to Phil, with this letter, hoping that it will be his ticket to freedom.

He makes the 1200 mile journey back home along with another of Paul's leaders, and fearfully awaits his fate.

Philemon is handed the sealed letter. Since it is from Paul, with joy and great anticipation, he opens the letter and begins to read:

I.

⁴I always thank my God as I remember you in my prayers, ⁵because I hear about your love for all his holy people and your faith in the Lord Jesus. ⁶I pray that your partnership with us in the faith may be effective in deepening your understanding of every good thing we share for the sake of Christ. ⁷Your love has given me great joy and encouragement, because you, brother, have refreshed the hearts of the Lord's people.

⁸Therefore, although in Christ I could be bold and order you to do what you ought to do, ⁹yet I prefer to appeal to you on the basis of love. It is as none other than Paul—an old man and now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus— ¹⁰that I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, who became my son while I was in chains.

This is a great example of speaking the truth in love. Paul begins by reminding Philemon of his care for him and his gratitude for their relationship.

Then he makes begins to make his appeal. “Onesimus became a child of God while he was away. He is like a son to me. I’m not going to tell you what to do. Instead, I am going to make my request on the basis of love. If you’re going to react or respond to this situation, do so in love.”

Onesimus is not property, he is my family. Philemon had the right to do anything to Onesimus and no one would have questioned him.

But both Onesimus and Philemon have changed.

When I read the letter I hear God speaking to me (to us). God is in the process of uniting people.

Philemon needed to learn that people are not property; they are sons and daughters of God.

If you have employees or people you supervise, remember this as a Christian leader. How you view people “under you” is to be one of your greatest distinguishing marks.

Example

Paul says, “I could tell you what to do, but if you’ll let love guide you, you’ll do the right thing.”
Don’t do the right thing because you feel obligated or ordered to do so. Instead, do right out of love.

Motivation is very important to God – God looks at our hearts.

1 John 4:19-21

¹⁹ We love because he first loved us.^(A) ²⁰ If anyone says, “I love God,” yet hates his brother,^(B) he is a liar.^(C) For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen,^(D) cannot love God, whom he has not seen.^(E) ²¹ And he has given us this command.^(F) Whoever loves God must also love his brother.

Put yourself in Philemon’s shoes. God says to you, “Therefore, I am making an appeal on behalf of _____, who is my child.” Whose name is God inserting there for you to love?

Love, because you are loved

II.

¹¹ Formerly **he was** useless to you, **but now** he has become useful both to you and to me. ¹² I am sending him—who is my very heart—back to you. 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. ¹⁴ But I did not

want to do anything without your consent, so that any favor you do would not seem forced but would be voluntary.¹⁵ Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back forever—¹⁶ no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother. He is very dear to me but even dearer to you, both as a fellow man and as a brother in the Lord.

Perhaps this was God's plan! "All things work together..."

He once was "useless". Once was a thief. Once he was a runaway. Once he was a slave.

Now he is useful. Now, a dear brother. Now he is as valuable to Paul as Philemon once was.

Jesus changes people and wants to change our view of people.

He wants us to learn to be slaves and He wants us to free slaves. He wants us to become less in our own pride and others to become greater in our own eyes.

The basis of our unity is that we are family and need each other. Everyone has something to offer you (even those you once looked down upon). Paul needed Onesimus. Philemon has something to receive from him besides his servitude.

Example from business: (a worker who is promoted)

Galatians 3:26-28

²⁶ So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, ²⁷ for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. ²⁸ There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

- God elevates people – the least is the greatest
- God liberates people – the slaves are set free
- God imparts value and dignity – example:

Recognize the value of others not for what they can do for you but for whom they are.

III.

¹⁷ So if you consider me a partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. ¹⁸ If he has done you any wrong or owes you anything, charge it to me. ¹⁹ I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand. I will pay it back—not to mention that you owe me your very self. ²⁰ I do wish, brother, that I may have some benefit from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in Christ. ²¹ Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I ask.

Paul is doing everything he can to unite these two. He is being proactive as a peacemaker. He is

willing to pay the bill, he pleads on behalf of the two of him, and he uses all his authority to bring these two together.

Again, God speaks through this letter – “I am paying the bill for their sins. I’ve picked up their tab. I’ll make it right.”

He wants us to be proactive, not passive in the process.

There are things that I can choose not to do. There are situations I can stay out of and ignore. But there are times when I must step up and become proactive with love. Example:

According to church history, Philemon reads the letter and considers it. It is a shocker to him. It is true that his slave was useless but now he studies these words and his anger subsides. He sits down with Onesimus and Onesimus apologizes and tells him his story and testimony. It is clear that God’s hand is in the situation and Onesimus is eager to serve the Lord in any way possible. Philemon does what God was asking him to do – he sets him free and embraces him as an equal. Onesimus grows in faith and becomes a leader. Eventually, he is sent out by the church to the city of Ephesus, where he becomes the bishop of the church in that city. He becomes one of the first leaders to collect the letters of Paul, becoming one who helped put together what we now call the New Testament.

Just after moving there, in the year 64 a devastating earthquake hits the region and destroys the city of Colossae.

In our series, Modern Family, we have had messages on being born twice, being adopted, family wisdom, the head of the house and prodigals. All of these messages emphasize the wealth of the love of God, invested in us. He has proactively dumped/lavished this love onto us and into our hearts. He paid for our freedom.

Today’s message shows us that **love is proactive**, and it’s up to us to make deposits of that love into others – not passively, but proactively, even towards those who we may have had a problem with.

Where can you extend grace? Who can you encourage? Who can you forgive and set free?

Love proactively.