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Philemon 1, 10-21
CHRIST'S LOVE MAKES THE USELESS USEFUL

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Do you know the meaning of your name? Perhaps, perhaps not! My name is Gregory which means "vigilant, watchful." I became a pastor and pastors are called to be an overseer watching over your souls. My wife's name is Susan which means "Full of grace." Grace is undeserved love, the very opposite of what we deserve. Many have told me that my wife is far more than I deserve. All our children received names either from the Scripture or regarding the Christian faith. Stephanie means "Crowned one." Michael is the archangel, "who is like God?" Naomi means "Pleasant, delightful." Matthew means "Gift of God" and Christopher means "He who holds Christ in his heart." I pray that they all live up to the meaning of their names.

Some people live up to the meaning of their names and others don't. Sometimes people will get a nickname that is the very opposite of what they are like. A man 6'8" and 350 pounds might have the nickname "Tiny." Today we are going to look at a man whose name meant "useful," and he was anything but useful. He would be changed by the Gospel. CHRIST'S LOVE MAKES THE USELESS USEFUL.

The Bible is the most important book ever written. It tells us about God's love for fallen man. It centers on the promise that would be fulfilled in the very Son of God, Jesus Christ, who would buy us back from our slavery to sin, death and the power of Satan. It is really 66 books, 39 in the Old Testament and 27 in the New Testament that were written over the course of many years by many different writers in different countries in different languages that tell this story. There is only one author and that is God. Some books of the Bible are very long. There are 150 Psalms. Isaiah has 66 chapters, Genesis 50 and the Gospel of Matthew 28. Yet they can easily be read over the course of a week. Some books are only a single chapter. We have one of them this morning. There is much in this book, yet I believe that very few have actually read it. Even the name of the book is often mispronounced. A recent Lutheran commentary came out with 432 pages of application.

Most of the Apostle Paul's letters were written to congregations. A few were written to individuals. Philemon was the most personal of his letters. C.S. Lewis called Philemon "the most beautiful and intensely human of all St. Paul's epistles, full of charm and beauty." We see great insights into the very soul of the great apostle to the Gentiles. We see love, forgiveness, peacemaking and a continual appeal to do what is right for the sake of Christ who did not treat us as our sins deserved. Paul has a very special request that he will make.

Philemon is a companion to the letter of Colossians. They were both written at the same time about A.D. 60. They would be taken to the same destination, the city of Colosse, by the same messenger. They both deal with the same spirit of forgiving love. Take the time this morning to read Colossians chapter 3 and you will see what I mean.

We don't know a lot personally about Philemon. Paul addresses him as "our dear friend and fellow worker." Philemon was a convert to Christianity. Paul was instrumental in that, giving him instruction personally in the city of Ephesus or indirectly through his pupil Epaphras who founded the congregation in Colosse. Philemon was a very active member of that congregation. Remember that there were no church buildings at that time. You had house churches where people met and worshiped and were instructed. In many cases there was persecution of Christians. Those who opened their homes for worship could lose everything they had. Philemon had a reputation among his fellow believers

as a very generous and loving person. He was a devoted worker. His son Archippus served as pastor of the congregation in Colosse at least for the time when Epaphras was in Rome with Paul.

Paul is going to intercede for a man name Onesimus, a slave whose name meant “useful” or “profitable” but was anything but that to Philemon, his master. He had run away, most likely having stolen a sum of money from Philemon. He now found his way to Rome, a large city where hopefully no one knew him or would try to turn him in. There were millions of slaves in the Roman Empire at that time. It was estimated that ½ to ¾ of all the people in the Empire were slaves of one sort or another. Somehow Onesimus found his way to where Paul was staying. Even though Paul was under house arrest, he was not in chains or living in a dungeon. That type of imprisonment would come later, at the very end of his life. Here we are told, he “welcomed all who came to see him.” We don’t know the circumstances. Why did he come to Paul? He knew who Paul was. Did he see Paul as an easy mark for a scam to get some money or had he hit rock bottom, realized what a mess he had made of his life, and went to Paul because he had nowhere else to turn? We don’t know.

What we do know is that Onesimus became a Christian. He realized that he was not merely running away from Philemon, but he was running away from God as well. He realized that Jesus Christ had taken all his sins to the cross and gave him full and free forgiveness. Onesimus was a changed man. He wanted to show his love and gratitude to God, and he would. His name had meant “useful,” but he was pretty useless to everybody but himself. Things would change with the love of Christ. Now he would be the very opposite. He would be useful to everyone, beginning with Paul.

Paul could have visitors, but Paul’s movement was hampered by his arrest. He needed to get messages to people. Onesimus would become Paul’s legs in Rome. He was Paul’s “Go for.” Onesimus would become very useful to Paul and to all the Christians in Rome. He did tasks that took a lot of time and effort and did them willingly.

Paul was becoming very attached to Onesimus. He calls him “my son” and “my very heart.” Paul trusted him because Paul knew how the Gospel of Jesus Christ can change hearts. He had lived it himself. He had been a persecutor of the church and Christ called him to be his apostle to the Gentiles. As we read the short letter, we can see that Paul would have loved for Onesimus to stay in Rome and continue to help him. He probably could have convinced Philemon to do so, but Paul had to send him back.

There were a couple of reasons for that. First of all, Paul knew that the law speaks about coveting what belongs to another. We know that the Ten Commandments forbid coveting something that belongs to our neighbor. Onesimus belonged to Philemon. We are not going to touch the issue of slavery this morning and whether it should or should not have been abolished in Paul’s time. Paul was not about changing society and its order. He was about preaching the Gospel which alone can change human hearts. The gospel in the hearts of both masters and slaves would end the abuses of slavery and lead both masters and slaves to a new respect and Christian concern for one another. Christianity has been instrumental in getting slavery abolished in many parts of the world including America. Onesimus would return to Philemon his master and he would return willingly. He would seek his master’s forgiveness and hope to return to his service.

Philemon had the right to do any number of things to his runaway slave. He could be punished and punished severely. He could have Onesimus branded on the forehead, fitted with an iron collar, had him flogged or even crucified. The laws of the state permitted such things. But Paul would appeal to a higher law, the law of Christian love. Paul asks that Philemon would receive Onesimus back in forgiveness.

Paul does not try to excuse the useless behavior of Onesimus. There was no excuse. What he did was wrong and inexcusable. He does ask Philemon to forgive him and there is a big difference between excusing sin and forgiving it. Excusing sin means looking at it as no big deal. That is what we want even when our words and actions have truly

hurt other people. Then we try to place the blame on the very people that we have hurt. Jesus Christ did not come to excuse sins; he came to forgive them and once more bring us back to a loving relationship with the very God that we have offended by our thoughts, words, and actions.

Paul pleads for forgiveness. It is a very moving letter. Christian love absolutely predominates this letter. You can tell that Paul chose his words very carefully as all of us should. The one who was formerly useless was now useful for Paul and he would be useful for Philemon and for the people of Colosse. Once again, we see how God can take something that was bad and turn it into something good that will help many people. Many years before this incident, Joseph was sold into slavery by his brothers. God used it to save Joseph's family. Philemon formerly had a servant who did things because he had to do them. Now he would have a slave that would work joyfully and willingly. He would serve Philemon as though he was serving the Lord.

Philemon would in fact be losing a slave and gaining a brother. That's what Paul emphasizes over and over again. You could say that these two men formerly had nothing in common. Now they were joined together in Christ. They were members of the same family, God's family. They were both brought into the family in the same way, through the washing of the Word in Holy Baptism. Both would rejoice in the message of the Gospel that their sins were washed away by the holy, precious blood of Christ and that they had received the very righteousness of Christ. Both of them could commune at the Lord's altar, receiving their Savior's very body and blood, given and shed for the forgiveness of their sins. It was a new relationship, a better relationship, one that would extend into eternity.

Welcome him as you would welcome me." That was Paul's plea. All of them were brothers in Christ: Paul, Philemon, Onesimus and all the rest. That is what being a Christian is all about. Jesus prayed for forgiveness for his enemies, even as he hung on the cross and they hurled insults at him. Can we do anything less than what our master did?

Paul would back up his words even more. Certainly, Philemon would have suffered a financial loss, both from the stolen money and from lost service. Paul was willing to take care of that debt if it would make a difference. This letter shows us that the Gospel works. The Law may force obedience, but only the gospel changes human hearts.

Do you see yourself in this picture? Do you see yourself as one who had run away from God and was estranged? Jesus pleaded for you and paid your debt. He changed your status from one who was useless to one who is now useful as you joyfully serve God with your works of love. We are welcomed back with a new status, sons of God. May we always serve our Lord in joy! AMEN.