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The Jesus Way | Good

Philemon 1:10-19

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It can be difficult to pull some of Paul's words forward into modern times. Sometimes it's impossible. For example, slavery was quite common then, but abhorrent now. Even so, in this letter Paul appeals to the best parts of Philemon, asking him to accept his slave as equal in the eyes of the gospel. The gospel appeals to the best parts in all of us, calling us forward into more inclusion and grace.

Setup: Betamax

- I'm a townie. My family moved to the south metro in 1986, and I can tell you which roads used to be dirt roads and what used to be where.
- However, when I start telling stories about those days, some of it is hard for me to explain to younger folks.
- For example, when I was a kid, and we wanted to watch a movie at home, we would either: Look through the TV guide for the week in the Sunday paper (they still make these!) and watch a movie as it was being broadcasted live OR...
- We'd go to the local GAS STATION (the one near the bait shop that was in the woods at the top of the hill on a dirt road, no less) and rent a VCR.
- NOTE: I didn't say rent a video (hold up Tron Betamax tape), although you'd have to do that also, but rent the actual VCR to play it on! (Hold up Betamax player)
- How do you watch a movie at home today? In literally four taps of a button you could be watching the newest movie on your couch without having to get up.
- Step 1: Turn on TV. Step 2: Select "Netflix". Step 3: Choose your profile. Step 4: Hit Okay and now you're watching the latest showing from Netflix.
- Sometimes it can be a challenge to contextualize things that don't make sense to us anymore. Like lugging this (hold up Betamax box) around so you can watch a movie in your house and then lugging it back to a GAS STATION.

Introduce: Philemon

- Today's sermon comes from a very short letter from the Apostle Paul in the New Testament. It's presented as a *single* chapter with only 25 verses. It's the *shortest* of Paul's letters.
- But it's still technically a "book", so if you're behind on your Goodreads or reading goal for the year, here's a cheap win...
- Here's the synopsis of what's going on. Paul is writing a letter to Philemon and the church that met in his home.
- At some point, a slave of Philemon's named Onesimus comes to Paul in prison.

- Slaves in those days, typically were those in debt or the defeated. And it wasn't necessarily a lifetime of servitude, and somewhat unlike the atrocities of the American slavery system.
- So now this slave, Onesimus, meets Paul and as Paul writes, "I became his father in the faith while here in prison." It would have been fascinating to see what that looked like.
- Scholars have debated if Onesimus was a runaway slave, or if Philemon had sent him as his slave to go and help Paul while he was in prison.
- In those days, having people visit and help care for you in prison could be the difference between life and death.
- (Side note, when Jesus talks about visiting those in prison, it's a reminder that this was a high-stakes situation for the person in prison)
- But now Paul is sending this slave, Onesimus, back to Philemon, his owner.

Philemon 1:10-19

¹⁰I appeal to you to show kindness to my child, Onesimus. I became his father in the faith while here in prison.

¹¹Onesimus hasn't been of much use to you in the past, but now he is very useful to both of us. ¹²I am sending him back to you, and with him comes my own heart. ¹³I wanted to keep him here with me while I am in these chains for preaching the Good News, and he would have helped me on your behalf. ¹⁴But I didn't want to do anything without your consent. I wanted you to help because you were willing, not because you were forced. ¹⁵It seems you lost Onesimus for a little while so that you could have him back forever. ¹⁶He is no longer like a slave to you. He is more than a slave, for he is a beloved brother, especially to me. Now he will mean much more to you, both as a man and as a brother in the Lord. ¹⁷So if you consider me your partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. ¹⁸If he has wronged you in any way or owes you anything, charge it to me. ¹⁹I, PAUL, WRITE THIS WITH MY OWN HAND: I WILL REPAY IT. AND I WON'T MENTION THAT YOU OWE ME YOUR VERY SOUL!

Focus: The people we've written off...

- Here's what I want to pull forward 2000 years to try and get us to think about in our modern times...
- What can a letter to a slave owner and his home church teach us about today?
- Or is this like my story about renting a Betamax VCR? Nostalgic, but completely unhelpful! And that was less than 40 years ago, not 2000.
- First: The word Onesimus literally meant "useful" and Paul does some wordplay.
- "Onesimus hasn't been of much use to you in the past, but now he is very useful to both of us." 1:11
- I feel like Paul is saying to Philemon, "Forget what you used to know about Onesimus. Something's different. Don't just write him off as just a slave. He's living into his

identity, his name, and his calling.”

- I’m reminded of a dear friend of mine who used to tell me, “When I started following Jesus, it’s like my whole brain had re-wired itself.”
- Second: Paul writes *“He is no longer like a slave to you. He is more than a slave, for he is a beloved brother, especially to me. Now he will mean much more to you, both as a man and as a brother in the Lord.” 1:16*
- Paul is telling Philemon to stop seeing Onesimus as property and to start seeing him as family and as an equal in the family of Christ.
- This would have been a RADICAL ask of Philemon. Paul is asking him to see another person in a completely different light that he’s used to.
- That’s because the gospel appeals to the best parts in all of us, calling us forward into more inclusion and grace.
- And it might be a big stretch for us, and that’s okay!

So what: How might this story show up in our life this week?

- I don’t have answers to give you, but I’ll give you some questions to ponder.
- FIRST: Is there anyone in your life you’ve written off? Are there people who you’ve begun to treat, consciously or unconsciously as “extras” in the script of your life?
- If you were to treat them as someone of value, usefulness, or Onesimus-ness, how might that change your relationship with them for the better.
- How might you treat them with such dignity, care, and even *attention* that when they spend time with you they feel like they’ve spent time with Jesus? That’s called “incarnational ministry” and you don’t have to be on the POP payroll to do it!
- SECOND: Are there people in your life you’ve treated like a commodity, or as “less-than” because of cultural, social, or professional hierarchy?
- How do you treat and see others by default, especially people who can do nothing for you in return?
- FINALLY: How will the gospel, the Good News of God’s relentless love and grace for you and all people, call forward the best in YOU and the best in others?
- And be careful with this one. It might rewire your brain AND your heart!
- PRAY