

God's love is inclusive. You don't have to earn your way to the table, Jesus paid that price for all of us. God calls us to welcome the "useless" and see their true value through His eyes.

4. Parents in the Faith

Philemon 1:10 NLT - 10 I appeal to you to show kindness to my child, Onesimus. I became his father in the faith while here in prison.

1 Corinthians 4:15-16 NLT - 15 For even if you had ten thousand others to teach you about Christ, you have only one spiritual father. For I became your father in Christ Jesus when I preached the Good News to you. 16 So I urge you to imitate me.

Paul referred to Onesimus as his "child" and himself as "his father". Our faith grows in relationship with other believers., especially those mature believers who take responsibility for our spiritual wellbeing.

Paul lived out his faith in a way that others were invited to imitate. We need to have spiritual fathers or mothers in our lives who show us how to live, and we need to live in a way that invites younger believers to follow us. Who in your life looks to you for guidance and who do you look to as an example in faith?

WRAP-UP

Let's remember that love levels the ground around the cross, we put restoring relationships as our goal when in conflict, we welcome the "useless" around us and become fathers and mothers in the faith.

MEMORY VERSE.

There is no longer Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male and female. For you are all one in Christ Jesus.

- Galatians 3:28 NLT

PRAYER (20 MIN) Ask your group to pray for you regarding one area where you can apply this study in your life.

Challenge - Is there someone in your life who is "useless", marginalized by society or just not feeling valuable? How can you speak into their life this week, to welcome them into your life?

"Love Levels the Playing Field"

Prison Letters- #15

INTRODUCTION

The last of Paul's prison letters in our summer series is the Book of Philemon. It is Paul's shortest letter with only 25 verses. It was written to Philemon, a Roman citizen, to reconcile him with his runaway slave, Onesimus. You may wonder how reconciling a runaway slave can be applied to us. Paul's appeal to Philemon essentially asks him to set aside cultural norms of class, position, and value, to view Onesimus as Christ sees him, a valued member of the family of God. We may not have slaves, but we still have class distinctions that taint our view of other believers. In this brief letter we see how Paul lives out the Gospel, and how God's love levels the playing field.

Ice Breaker

Have you ever rescued an unwanted pet? What was their story?

Key Passage

Philemon 1:15-16 NLT - 15 It seems you lost Onesimus for a little while so that you could have him back forever. 16 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.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Love Levels

There are many things that attempt to define us, or that we choose to define ourselves by. We may rely on context to define ourselves, so, if we meet someone in a work setting, we introduce ourselves by our vocation, "Hi I'm Bob the project manager... or Jan the engineer...". And at soccer practice "I'm Ben's dad, or Suzie's coach"...

What are some of the most common roles you identify yourself with when introduced?

Our roles in life shape us and shape our perception of ourselves and others. But when something changes, such as divorce, retirement, or physical injury we sometimes feel we lose a part of our identity as well. We may no longer be a husband, a banker, or a runner. But there is one role which identifies us that will never change- Child of God.

Our identity in Christ should influence not only how we view ourselves, but how we view others as well.

What three categorical distinctions did Paul address in Galatians 3? Do we still find division amongst believers in these areas? Are there other areas that you think could be added to this list?

Galatians 3:26-28 NLT - 26 For you are all children of God through faith in Christ Jesus. 27 And all who have been united with Christ in baptism have put on Christ, like putting on new clothes. 28 There is no longer Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male and female. For you are all one in Christ Jesus.

2. Relationship Rules

Paul points out that we are all in the family of faith. He no longer saw Onesimus as “the slave” but as his brother. Paul wanted Philemon to also see him in that way. We may occupy different positions in life or in the church, but God’s love for us has given us all equal value, and we in fact, we need one another. Onesimus would probably remain a slave in Philemon’s household, but he should return to a different relationship to Philemon.

Philemon 1:16-17 NLT - 16 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. 17 So if you consider me your partner, welcome him as you would welcome me.

Let’s see if we can put ourselves in Philemon’s shoes. Imagine that a family member stole something of value from you and then disappeared. Later you are contacted by a friend who says that family member has a change of heart and has become a believer.

What emotions and reactions you would have at that announcement? Would you have placed conditions upon his return home?

We don’t know what Philemon’s response would have been, but Paul went the extra mile to give Philemon a new perspective on his relationship with Onesimus.

Philemon 1:18-19 NLT - 18 If he has wronged you in any way or owes you anything, charge it to me. 19 I, PAUL, WRITE THIS WITH MY OWN HAND: I WILL REPAY IT. AND I WONT MENTION THAT YOU OWE ME YOUR VERY SOUL!

Colossians 3:13-14 NLT - 13 Make allowance for each other's faults, and forgive anyone who offends you. Remember, the Lord forgave you, so you must forgive others. 14 Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds us all together in perfect harmony.

What difference did it make that the debt of Onesimus would be paid by someone to whom Philemon was himself indebted (Paul). In what ways does this parallel our relationship to Jesus and to others?

3. Welcome the Useless

Philemon 1:11 NLT - 11 Onesimus hasn't been of much use to you in the past, but now he is very useful to both of us.

Paul used a bit of a pun in verse 11. The name Onesimus translates to “useful”. So, when he says “Onesimus wasn’t useful to you before”, he was saying, “Philemon you failed to see this guy for who he really is, and he is useful (Onesimus)”. It all comes back to our identity in Jesus, not in the eyes of the world. Our value is in our identity as a child of God.

Is there someone you know who has been labeled “useless”? Maybe someone who never does their share of the work, or only shows up when there is a free meal being served? Maybe you’ve been called useless, and you have come to believe that about yourself. God sees beyond our actions to our true identity. He sees the person He made us to be. Pray with your group for those who have been called useless, that they would be seen by themselves, and by others, as the person God intended them to be. Pray for healing of those hurt by this label placed on them.