

TRINITY EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH  
MINOCQUA, WI  
SERMON FOR SEPTEMBER 4-5, 2022

*Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, To Philemon, our dear friend and coworker...*

<sup>3</sup> *Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.*

<sup>4</sup> *I always thank my God as I remember you in my prayers, <sup>5</sup> because I hear about your love and faith that you have toward the Lord Jesus and for all the saints. <sup>6</sup> I pray that this fellowship of your faith may become active in understanding every good thing that belongs to us in Christ. <sup>7</sup> For I have received great joy and encouragement from your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed by you, brother.*

<sup>8</sup> *For that reason, even though I have plenty of boldness in Christ to order you to do what is proper, <sup>9</sup> I am appealing to you, instead, on the basis of love, just as I, Paul, am an old man and now also a prisoner of Jesus Christ. <sup>10</sup> I am appealing to you on behalf of my child Onesimus. I became his father while I was in chains. <sup>11</sup> There was a time when he was useless to you, but now he is useful both to you and to me. <sup>12</sup> I have sent him (who is my very heart) back to you. Welcome him. <sup>13</sup> I wanted to keep him with me, so that he might serve me in your place while I am in chains for the gospel. <sup>14</sup> But I did not want to do anything without your consent, so that your kindness would not be the result of compulsion, but of willingness. <sup>15</sup> Perhaps this is why he was separated from you for a while: so that you would have him back forever, <sup>16</sup> no longer as a slave, but as more than a slave, as a dear brother. He certainly is dear to me, but he is even more of a dear brother to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord.*

<sup>17</sup> *So if you consider me your partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. <sup>18</sup> And if he has wronged you in any way or owes you anything, charge it to me. <sup>19</sup> I, Paul, have written this with my own hand: I will repay it—not to mention that you owe me your very self. <sup>20</sup> Yes, brother, I am asking for a favor from you in the Lord. Refresh my heart in Christ. <sup>21</sup> Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I ask.* (Philemon 1, 3-21 EHV)

Ever read someone else's mail? Whether glancing on purpose over someone else's shoulder or absentmindedly opening up a letter from your mailbox addressed to your next door neighbor, you've read mail intended for someone else. That's exactly what we're going to do today – peek over Paul's shoulder to see what he's writing to his friend Philemon. Actually, we're supposed to see this, because this short letter is also the Word of God, inspired by the Holy Spirit. Along the way, we'll gain insight into **"Useful" Christianity**.

During his first visit to Rome, Paul spent two years under house arrest. He was in chains, so to speak, but people were able to visit him freely and Paul kept busy teaching and writing letters – including Ephesians, Colossians and this letter to Philemon, a gentleman who was part of the church in Colossae. After his usual greeting of "Grace and peace to you...I'm praying for you...I thank God for you" Paul gets right to the point.

In the room with him, likely standing at his side, was a man named Onesimus. He was a runaway slave who legally, rightfully belonged to Philemon. How did Paul and Onesimus meet up in Rome, more than 1,000 miles away from Colossae? It's quite possible that Paul had become acquainted with Onesimus during previous visits to Philemon's home. As a runaway, Onesimus heard of Paul's imprisonment and thought of Paul as someone to help him. In the end he would receive more help than he bargained for.

Verse 10 - ***"I am appealing to you on behalf of my child Onesimus. I became his father while I was in chains."*** During their time together in Rome, Onesimus had become Paul's "child," that is, a Christian under Paul's careful teaching and supervision. And Onesimus had become very helpful to Paul, very useful. Verse 11 – ***"There was a time when he was useless to you, but now he is useful both to you and to me."*** Paul uses a clever play on words here. The name Onesimus means "useful." When Onesimus had run away, Philemon had lost the services of this slave; Onesimus was useless to him. But now, as a new Christian and fellow believer,

Onesimus was exactly what his name meant: “useful” to both Paul and Philemon. To Paul as his messenger, companion and right-hand man while in prison. To Philemon – well, Paul explains:

**“Perhaps this is why he was separated from you for a while: so that you would have him back forever, no longer as a slave, but as more than a slave, as a dear brother. He certainly is dear to me, but he is even more of a dear brother to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord.”** (vv. 15-16) Paul was sending Onesimus back to his master. It was the right thing to do. Paul tells Philemon that the right thing for him to do was not to give Onesimus what he deserved. What did he deserve? First-time runaway slaves were branded on the forehead and put in chains. A second offense merited flogging and crucifixion.

Instead, Paul writes, **“So if you consider me your partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. And if he has wronged you in any way or owes you anything, charge it to me. I, Paul, have written this with my own hand: I will repay it—not to mention that you owe me your very self.”** (vv. 17-19) “My dear Philemon,” Paul is saying, “This runaway slave may have cost you money and time. He may have embarrassed you. But because of Christ, he now has value to you, much more than before. Forgive him, and whatever he owes, charge it to me.”

A tremendous lesson in love and communication. Paul had unshackled Onesimus from the bonds of spiritual slavery. He brought Onesimus to faith in the Lord Jesus who lived, died, rose again and lived again for him. Thus unshackled, he unleashed Onesimus to a life of “useful” Christianity. He was still Philemon’s slave and needed to go back to right the wrong done by running away. But he was free to serve Christ, and did so by tending to Paul and by carrying this letter and possibly the letter to the Colossians. Paul mentioned Onesimus by name in Colossians 4:9.

Paul’s approach to Philemon was masterful and loving. He calls him “dear friend,” “coworker,” “partner” and “brother” several times. Paul points out that while Philemon and Onesimus are master/slave, they are also brothers in Christ, members together and equally of God’s family, which completely changed the dynamic of their relationship. Paul does not force, coerce or threaten. He uses pure Gospel motivation: **“I, Paul, have written this with my own hand: I will repay it—not to mention that you owe me your very self. Yes, brother, I am asking for a favor from you in the Lord. Refresh my heart in Christ. Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I ask.”** (vv. 19-21)

This letter/short book of the Bible is a beautiful picture of what Christ has done for you and me. Spiritual runaways by nature, we were by nature useless to God. Like Onesimus, we were condemned by the Law and saved by God’s grace. Christ Jesus appealed to God the Father on our behalf, just as Paul did for Onesimus essentially saying, “Receive them, Father, welcome them, just as you would receive me.”

Jesus put action behind his words. He lived, died, rose and lives again for us. He unshackled us from the chains of spiritual slavery, from the debt of sin, freed us from a useless, purposeless existence. He’s unleashed us for a life of service to God, set us free for “useful” Christianity.

This brief letter is sprinkled with references to spiritual examples of practical useful Christianity. 1) Paul remembers Philemon in prayer. He thanks God for him. Paul mentions such activity in almost all of his letters. Do you thank God for the important people in your life? Let them know they’re important to you. Let them know you love them.

2) We’re partners in the faith. Paul writes to Philemon: **“I hear about your love and faith that you have toward the Lord Jesus and for all the saints. I pray that this fellowship of your faith may become active in understanding every good thing that belongs to us in Christ.”** (vv. 5-6) We share our faith, not just to benefit others, but to come to a fuller understanding of every good thing we have in Christ. When we share faith, when we’re active in faith, we’re partners and co-workers in the mysteries of Almighty God.

Another encouragement to “useful” Christianity: 3) Forgive! Regularly, ruthlessly, recklessly, relentlessly. Forgive unconditionally, undeservedly, completely. Forgive as God has forgiven us in Christ. Nourished and motivated by the Word, we’ll do even more than God asks, certainly far more than the world ever expect.

“Useful” Christianity, especially in this area of forgiveness, stuns the world and impacts human hearts one at a time.

Example #4: Refresh people. Verse 7 – ***“I have received great joy and encouragement from your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed by you, brother.”*** “You refresh people, Philemon. You refresh me.” I’ve been asking myself, “What word would describe what I do to people? ‘Steve, you \_\_\_\_\_ people.’” What word would my family and friends put in that blank? What would you put in that blank? Some examples: “Steve, you drain/frustrate/confuse/exhaust people.” Am I like a cheap, overbearing cologne – you know, the kind that gags people when you’re standing right next to them and that lingers long after the person’s gone? Or am I a breath of fresh air? Don’t answer that out loud! What an encouragement for you and me to be that breath of fresh air, to be a source of joy and encouragement to others. In other words, to be Christ to them. And to say to others, “You refresh me. Things are better because of you.”

I’d like to close by doing just that. I’d like to make Paul’s words to Philemon my words to you. ***“I always thank my God as I remember you in my prayers, because I hear about your love and faith that you have toward the Lord Jesus and for all the saints. I pray that this fellowship of your faith may become active in understanding every good thing that belongs to us in Christ. For I have received great joy and encouragement from your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed by you, brother(s and sisters).”*** (vv. 4-7) Unshackled from sin and unleashed to serve, we are no longer useless, but useful in Christ.

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Stephen Luchterhand".

Pastor Stephen Luchterhand  
Minocqua, WI