

2/19/2023

From Useless to Useful

Philemon 1:10-16

*From: Paul, an Apostle of Jesus Christ  
To: Philemon and the Church at Collosae  
Regarding: Onesimus*

# FROM USELESS TO USEFUL

**PHILEMON 1:10-16**

Special Music: “Raise a Hallelujah”

Levistance

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ipMAPo58gvY>

**Philemon 1:10-16**

**10 that I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, who became my son while I was in chains.**

**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.

## **GOD'S TRACTOR**

The man said the tractor  
Hadn't started in years.  
The paint was all gone.  
And he'd stripped all the gears.  
The engine was frozen.  
The wires were frayed.  
And most of the parts  
Were no longer made.  
The tires were rotten.  
The brakes didn't work.  
The headlights were missing,  
And the clutch had a jerk.

I asked the man how much if I took it today?  
He said fifty bucks and I could haul it away.

So, I loaded it up,  
And took it away,  
Not to a junkyard  
But my own place to stay.  
I set it on blocks,  
Started checking it out.  
There was a load of work here,  
About that there's no doubt.  
I removed all the panels,  
Hoses and wires.

Emptied the gas tank,  
And removed all the tires.

And somewhere in that process, “it” ceased to be  
As I worked to restore it, it became “she.”

I rebuilt the engine  
From the head to the cam.  
Removed all the old oil  
Sealed it up tight as a clam  
New hoses, new wires  
New starter, new clutch  
New tires, new brakes  
New headlights and such.  
I refilled the fluids,  
New battery installed.  
She wasn't the same tractor  
I'd had had to haul.

As a final touch, I put her to bed,  
And gave her the name, my child 'Little Red.'

You see, none of us are useless,  
Even when gone.  
The light that we leave.  
Continues to live on.  
And when God gets his hand  
On our lives lived on earth

**His nimble fingers**

**Gives our bodies rebirth.**

**He heals all our wounds.**

**Makes us shiny and new.**

**We become fresh creations.**

**We're no longer through.**

**You might say you are finished. I say it ain't so.**

**You just need the rebuilding of your heavenly soul.**

**Serious question here. How many of you have had a moment in your life when you have felt totally useless? Incompetent? Unable to justify your existence? Devoid of purpose? You just can't seem to do anything right. Tried to help your mom make cookies and you dropped the mixing bowl and broke it? Helping your dad wash the car and let the hose get away from you and soaked him down? Tried to help your dad work on the car and he asks you for a 3/4" socket and you have no idea what he's talking about. Being called to the front of the class to answer a question only to realize that you studied the wrong chapter the night before? Got a ticket? Totaled a car? Everything you touched turned into one convoluted mess and you believed that everyone on the planet was mad at you for one thing or another?**

**Everyone around you was so sick of your foul-ups that they were unwilling to give you another chance. All you wanted to do was hide in your closet or run away. If you were older, the last thing you wanted to do was face your boss and tell him or her how badly you had messed up a contract or a project. Even if someone were to give you another chance, you were afraid to take it because you knew that you would just mess up again. Useless. Utterly useless.**

**Life coaches will tell us that our successes are built on the mountainous ashes of our failures. If we aren't making mistakes, then we aren't doing anything. Success is not determined by the number of times we get knocked down, but the number of times we get back up. Truly, don't they understand? When we are knocked down and the world keeps us pinned with our face in the toilet and won't let us back up while the people around us are screaming and**

kicking at us? No one understands what we are going through. They don't know and don't care what feels like to be us in this world. We are beyond useless. Just shoot us and get it over with so we are unable to cause any more trouble because, as we are, we attract trouble like magnets.

If you have never been there, you are truly blessed, because I'm not sure there is a worse feeling in the world than feeling, the one where like we believe we are useless, that we have no purpose, that we are never to be trusted. What a strange hero that makes Onesimus.

**10 that I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, who became my son while I was in chains.**

**11 Formerly he was useless to you**

There's that word, "USELESS." At some point in the past, Onesimus has lost favor with Philemon. He has proven himself to be untrustworthy. And it was at a time when Paul was in Colossae because he knew about whatever it was and how angry Philemon was with him. We aren't told what it was, but this slave, servant, worker, was unable to perform any task given to him. He either didn't want to or didn't try. He might have been lazy, stubborn, or just ignorant. But Philemon could not, would not, give him any important work because Onesimus seemed to carry an affliction that made him allergic to work. What do you do with someone like that? He didn't even show an appearance of wanting to change. He was USELESS. He couldn't sell or even give Onesimus to someone else because no one was willing to take him.

With Paul in jail in Rome, Philemon mapped out a plan in his head. He would send Onesimus to Rome to try and find Paul. That would get the useless slave out of Philemon's hair and had the potential of doing some good if he happened to find Paul. He didn't really have any hope that Onesimus could find Paul. After all, every other man who had been tasked with the same goal, had failed. And Onesimus did not have the skills or abilities to accomplish the task. Not to mention that he always seemed to attract trouble to him. But at least he wouldn't have to spend so much time encouraging Onesimus to get with the program. He just didn't have time to be playing games. So, this seemed like a splendid solution. Off to Rome with the lazy slave. Maybe he would stay gone for a while.

One of the greatest travesties in our human nature is that we give up on people long before we should. It's like we become inconvenienced trying do the right thing. If we don't get positive feedback in a modicum of time we stop thinking its worth our effort. We convince ourselves that we are just not going to help people if they don't do what we are asking. We put conditions on the nature of our outreach. "I will give you twenty bucks for a meal, but don't you dare spend it on alcohol." "I will get you a new set of clothing, but you had better take care of them and wash the clothes regularly." "I will get you a bike to get around on, but you can't trade it in for a fix."

Folks, people don't change overnight, especially when it comes to addictions. That does not mean that they do not need help. And help should always involve counseling of some type and encouragement to help them to



overcome the obstacles in their lives. Philemon did not believe for one minute that sending Onesimus to Rome was going to change his life, even if he found Paul. In a way, he probably did it more for himself rather than for Paul or Onesimus.

So, when Onesimus finds Paul, everyone is shocked. They probably believed that he would make a minimal effort and then make a run for it. But, to everyone's surprise, he didn't do that. As a matter of fact, the rumors quickly spread that Onesimus was making a careful, intentional, and dangerous search for Paul through some of the ugliest and meanest parts of Rome. Asking the wrong people questions could have had him in jail, too. And when he found Paul, he didn't run home. Instead, he stayed and took care of him, ministering to him and taking care of his needs. He made sure that he had food, water, and clothing. He sat with him for hours on end. He carried messages for him. He sang with him, prayed with him, and stood by him.

And Paul was grateful for Onesimus. At a time in his life where he thought everyone had deserted him, Onesimus came into his life to show him otherwise. He encouraged Onesimus and taught him. This slave of Philemon's came to mean so much to Paul, he began to think of him as his son and treated him as such.

There comes a time when Paul becomes convicted that he is taking advantage of Philemon by keeping Onesimus around. Paul begins to feel that the right thing to do would have been to send the young man back to Philemon in Colossae long before he did. But he had grown so fond of Onesimus. They had

bonded. And Paul had seen him grow from this awkward, cowardly, lazy, good for nothing, useless slave into a man, a friend, one who could be trusted with his very life. Onesimus had done a complete turn around and was now to the point of realizing that he cared more for Paul than he did for his own life. He was useless no more.

But I want you to think about this very carefully. While Philemon and the people of the church in Colossae saw Onesimus as useless, Paul saw him as a God send, someone who had never given up on him and had continued to take care of him. Paul saw the potential in Onesimus rather than form an opinion on his past mistakes. He didn't pass judgement. He was thankful for what Onesimus offered and was grateful for the time that he had with him. He had been given the time to nurture the young man just as Onesimus nurtured him.

But the time came for Onesimus to return to Colossae and Paul wanted to make sure that Philemon and the brethren in Colossae would give Onesimus the opportunity to show them that he had changed, that he was no longer useless. Paul writes to Philemon and says that he really wishes that Onesimus could remain with him, that Onesimus is important to him. And then he writes something utterly astounding to Philemon:

**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.**

In other words, maybe Onesimus had been gone for so long, is so that I could spend the necessary time with him to help him understand the nature of his spirit in relationship to God, so that he could embrace the attributes of Christ, not the least of which was eternal life. And he is saying this because he wants Philemon to take Onesimus back and not only accept him, but to treat him as a brother rather than a slave. That must have been so difficult for Philemon to hear. The worthless slave he had sent away returns and Paul is vouching for him. Paul heaps praise on Onesimus and tells Philemon, “Don’t just welcome him back, celebrate his return and the change in his nature. So much so, Treat him as a brother, not as an annoying fly. Treat him as an equal, because this man that stands before you, is an equal.

Where have we heard those words before? How about:

**2 Corinthians 3:18**

**And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord’s glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.**

and

**2 Corinthians 5:17**

**Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come. The old has gone, the new is here!**

God has brought each and every one of us through our own personal hell, often

**without explaining it to others. We are capable of change and with God's help, we can be like Onesimus and change to meet the needs of the people around us with non-judgmental attitudes and grace knowing that God has brought these people into our lives so that we can help them find their way with skills and opportunities for service. God forbid that we should turn them away because of preconceptions and judgement on their circumstances.**

**May God bless us to see the potential in others. May we see the possible when others only see the impossible. When others give up, let us see reason to rejoice. Let us lift people, even those the world has deemed useless.**

**God bless you all!**

**AMEN**

**Copyright © 2023 Rev. Walt Wellborn**

**Scripture references provided under copyright by:**

**THE HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION©, NIV© Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.© Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.'**