

Evotional

Sermon title: “Bessels’ values: By the grace of God and relying on the Holy Spirit we will love generously.”

Bible passage: Philemon.

Speaker: Neil Durling.

Date: 11.5.14.

Message:

Picture the tense scene about 2,000 years ago in Colossae in the Lycus Valley...

Paul was in prison in Ephesus or Rome. It was here that he met Onesimus, a runaway slave owned by Philemon. Using our imaginations to join the pieces, it seems likely that Onesimus had run away to hide in a big city, heard about Paul, met him and then found God. Or maybe he’d even heard of Paul from his owner Philemon?

Anyway, Tychicus, Paul’s postman, took the letter for Philemon (along with Colossians) to the Church in Colossae. It would have been read out in full by the church leader. I wonder if they read Colossians first (about Jesus nailing our sins to the cross and triumphing over them) and then this personal note to Philemon? The tension comes from the fact that Onesimus, who is mentioned in Colossians (“Our faithful & dear brother, who is one of you.” Colossians 4:9) helps Tychicus deliver the letters. This letter, of only 335 words in the original Greek, is read out with the runaway slave present!

Let’s read it together (Philemon is in blue)...

Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, To Philemon our dear friend and fellow worker, to Apphia our sister, to Archippus our fellow soldier and to the church that meets in your home: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. [Because Paul mentions all these people he is making it clear that this letter is meant for public reading in front of the whole church.]

I always thank my God as I remember you [“you” in verses 4 and 6 are singular, so this is pointed at Philemon in the midst of the church family] *in my prayers, because I hear about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints. I pray that you may be active in sharing your faith* [Paul’s prayer is that Philemon will be active in sharing his faith by welcoming Onesimus back], *so that you will have a full understanding of every good thing we have in Christ. Your love has given me great joy and encouragement, because you, brother, have refreshed the hearts of the saints.*

Therefore, although in Christ I could be bold and order you to do what you ought to do, yet I appeal to you on the basis of love. [Paul uses gentle language in verses 8 and 9 as he sends back Onesimus. Paul doesn’t call for a change to slavery laws but, rather, appeals to Philemon on the grounds of Christian love] *I then, as Paul—an old man* [an ‘old man’ can be an ambassador] *and now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus—I appeal to you for my son Onesimus* [Onesimus means “useful” or “profitable” and Paul plays on this language. Onesimus is now one of Paul’s best friends. He isn’t just sending back a runaway slave, he’s sending back his very heart – verse 12. Onesimus is like a son to him.], *who became my son while I was in chains. Formerly he was useless to you, but now he has become useful both to you and to me. I am sending him—who is my very heart—back to you. 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. But I did not want to do anything without your consent, so that any favour you do will be spontaneous and not forced.*

Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back for good—no longer as a slave [A slave could buy his freedom by giving money to the Priest at the Temple, who would then pay it to the owner. But to ask for forgiveness for a criminal slave was another matter altogether. This was unheard of!], *but better than a slave, as a dear brother.* [Slave = temporal and demeaning condition. Brother = an eternal relationship with each other because of God.] *He is very dear to me but even dearer to you, both as a man and as a brother in the Lord.*

So if you consider me a partner [Fellowship and/or business partner], *welcome him as you would welcome me.* [Receive him as you would receive me Paul says! Give him full acceptance. Not only does Paul want Philemon to forgive him, he wants him to welcome him as a cherished family member.] *If he has done you any wrong or owes you anything, charge it to me. I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand.* [This slave’s case and Paul’s dealing with it is truly revolutionary and opens a new chapter on social relationships.] *I will pay it back* [Did Onesimus steal some money and make a run for it? If so, Paul is willing to pay Philemon back. Masters would often imprison and have slaves whipped; they could even have them crucified. Paul says nothing of Philemon’s rights to punish Onesimus and never mentions that he might not take him back as a fellow brother. Paul is asking Philemon to be Jesus to Onesimus.]—*not to mention that you owe me your very self.*

I do wish, brother, that I may have some benefit 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. And one thing more: Prepare a guest room for me, because I hope to be restored to you in answer to your prayers. [If he comes he hopes to see what affect his letter has had first hand. No pressure then!]

Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends you greetings. And so do Mark [This is the man who betrayed Paul in Acts when he and Barnabas went their separate ways. But now Paul has forgiven and restored him!], Aristarchus, Demas [They were fellow workers. Demas forsakes Paul in 2 Timothy “having loved this present world.”] and Luke, my fellow workers. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.

In God’s kingdom love is central: And Paul repeats love (*agape*) in this letter. He prays for them because he hears about their love for other Christians (5). Their love has given Paul great joy and encouragement (7). And he therefore appeals to them on the basis of love (9). Paul loves Onesimus, has seen him made right with God and wants to see him in a right relationship with others.

The potential tension here is that Philemon could say “no”! His response could be: “Look Paul, I’ve been gracious. I haven’t killed him. I’ve taken him back as a slave. His living conditions are great. Look! I even let him worship with us on Saturdays and might let him join one of our rotas; I’m chatting to Roland Young about the possibility!”

But this is where the gospel message rubber hits the road. We are called to love one another generously. That can be hard in a place and with a people where our point of commonality is Jesus and not much else. We are a varied group of people and we all have “histories”, to a greater or lesser degree. For a disparate and odd bunch we seem to get on pretty well! But there are probably still some who get up our nose or we’ve fallen out with in the past. Are there people at Bessels we won’t forgive?

So my challenge to you (and me) is this: Will we show generous love to one another? Will we forgive and restore? Will we free people?

Questions:

1. How has the church changed in the way it does things today from what we read about of the Early Church in the New Testament?
2. Do we have any “redundant church traditions” that should be laid to rest?
3. How can I show generous love to others?
4. How can I forgive and restore?
5. How can I free people?

Prayer:

Dear Jesus, Please help me to love others at Bessels generously. Amen.