

What would you do if someone wronged you? How would you react if someone asked you on behalf of someone else to overlook the wrong? Would you push both people away? Would you cut off relations with them because of the entreaty? Would you, in effect punish the first person because of what they had done to you, regardless of how much that person had changed and asked for forgiveness?

Reflecting on these questions we approach Paul's *Letter to Philemon*. With a bit of levity, if one has read a lot of Paul's writings, then it becomes obvious that he has a basic formula to each of his letters: "Grace." "I thank God for you." "Hold fast to the gospel." "For the love of everything holy, stop being stupid." "Timothy says hi."¹ And, we could too easily put his letter to Philemon in the same category. But, I think that here we have Paul bringing a far more important and experiential approach to living into and out from the Gospel than he does in most of his other letters.

One of the things I draw from the Gospel, and, indeed, from the whole of the Bible is that God is grace-filled and grace-giving. Through Jesus the Messiah, God calls us to extend that grace to others as well as to ourselves. And, that's not easy. Our society, the culture in which we live, pushes us to withhold grace. How often are

¹ This "outline" comes from an unnamed source-meme forwarded from a couple of former seminary classmates.

books and movies about revenge for some wrong? How often do we see or hear of someone calling for the maximum punishment for each and every crime? How often do we find ourselves, even in the secret recesses of our thoughts, agreeing that something ruinous needs to be done in order for us to feel just?

I'm not saying that people who break the law should be getting away scot-free. But, if we want to call ourselves followers of Christ, if we want others to see us as living the virtues and values to which God calls us, then there are times when we need to temper our zeal for revenge, for punishment with grace. Otherwise, we counter the proclamation that we are saved by the grace of God, that in dying for our sins, Jesus embodied God's grace, and thereby imparted to us the gifts of grace, mercy, hope, peace, and love. Mind you, my use of the word grace is understood as "the spontaneous unmerited gift of the divine favor in the salvation of sinners, and the divine influence operating in individuals for their regeneration and sanctification" — so described by the *Encyclopedia Britannica*.

Still, put more simply, when I speak of God's grace, it is both a gift from God that tempers my human tendency towards exclusivity and self-centeredness that draws me away from others, as well as the acknowledgement that God's love is so vast as to accommodate my various and sundry shortfalls in living up to and into God's expectation of me.

That may sound a bit looney, and it may seem, to some, as impracticable. Turning back to our New Testament reading, we hear Paul's problem — how to help Philemon exercise grace toward Onesimus in light of his past actions. Part of what challenges us about this whole letter is that the issue discussed is slavery — in particular, how to respond to a runaway slave who, presumably, is also a thief.

To us nowadays slavery is wrong. Our rightful understanding of the dignity of life, specifically human life, is that owning another human being as chattel should never happen. And in most of the world today there are laws against slavery which is a good thing. We also should try to see that in the context of the times in which Paul and Philemon lived, owning slaves was as natural as owning a car, or a television, or having electricity. Many parts of the world then functioned because of slaves. And at the time laws were in place to severely punish slaves who ran away — unfortunately those laws offered little grace and less mercy.

But, Paul appeals to his “partner in Christ” to extend grace to Onesimus. Why? What reason does Paul think would have an effect on Philemon? Everything in society at the time was against any leniency. Paul's effort to speak a word of grace for Onesimus draws on three points:

- Paul's and Philemon's mutual work in Christ,
- Paul's relationship with Onesimus has become that of father and “adopted” son, and

- the work of grace in all three lives.

Remember, Paul confesses in other writings how he himself changed from a persecutor of Christians to an ardent disciple. He tells Philemon of the change in Onesimus. And, he asks Philemon to be an agent of grace and not treat his “former” slave as he could. Part of Paul’s appeal for grace is to effect reconciliation between the slave owner and the runaway slave.

Where in our world does reconciliation need to happen? What societal barriers stand in its way? How can people who believe in (and follow) Jesus make reconciliation happen? How can we be partner agents of reconciliation and restoration?

First, I suggest that we see the need for grace to be made visible — by being living examples of God’s grace. I’ve mentioned Valarie Kaur before in my *Pastor Ponderings*. Her mantra, “You are a part of me I do not yet know” when faced with hostility or wrongdoing by others pushes her to change her perspective. Second, like Ms. Kaur and others, we can call for grace to be effected in the world. It doesn’t have to be loud, or in a public manner, but by consistently, constantly, lovingly, personally, we can seek to persuade others who want vengeance and harm to turn away from such acts and live into grace themselves. Third, we will need to have our supply of grace renewed. Recognizing that we are limited and prone to fail in sustaining our efforts to live as God’s people, we should learn of, partake in, and accept grace as a gift of God received from the power of the Holy

Spirit through prayer, fellowship with others, and the celebration of worship and sacrament.

We know from experience that change is not easy. The pressure not to extend grace, even to ourselves, is relentless. Yet, when we live in and out of grace the change we experience in our lives and in the lives of those around us can be profound. As we move ever closer to God in Christ, let us be filled with grace; let us offer grace to others; and let us accept grace from God and from those whom we encounter.

Let us pray: Gracious God, we are humbled by all that You have done, are doing, and will do for us and the world in, through, and as Jesus the Christ. Continue to pour out such grace that the world becomes more loving, more grace-filled, more peaceful, more merciful. We pray all this in the name of Jesus, Your beloved Son, our Lord and Savior. Amen.