

The Family of God

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The Church and Christian Relationships Series

Philemon

As in past weeks, I am going to begin with humor. I will no longer say that this is the last week. But someone sent me a joke that I found very funny. Here it is.

This guy runs into a veterinarian's office with his dog in his hands, shouting, "Please, someone has to help me. There is something wrong with my dog. Help. Help, someone help me.

The veterinarian cancels his appointments and runs out of the office and examines the dog. He checks the dog out and very sympathetically says to the man, "Sir, I am sorry to tell you that your dog is dead. He was an old dog and, unfortunately, he died."

The guy breaks down screaming, "I can't accept that. I can't accept that my dog is dead. I demand a second opinion. My dog isn't dead."

So, the veterinarian says, "Well, if you want a second opinion..." He goes into the back room and brings out a cat. He puts the cat near the dog and the cat sniffs at the dead dog and hits him with his little paw and then runs away.

The vet says, "Sir, that's not a normal interaction between a cat and a dog. Your dog is dead."

The man says, "No way. My dog isn't dead. I demand a third opinion."

So the vet says, "Fine." He goes into the back room and brings out a chocolate Lab and puts the Lab next to the dead dog. The Lab sniffs around at the dog and then runs away.

The vet says, "Look, if your dog was alive, he would have reacted some way. You've watched dogs interact. Sir, your dog is dead."

Finally the man says, "OK. I accept it. My dog is dead. How much do I owe you?"

The veterinarian says, "\$650.00."

The guy says, "\$650.00? Just for telling me that my dog is dead?"

The vet says, "No, sir. My fee for my initial consultation and telling you that your dog is dead is only \$50.00, but I have to charge you another \$600 for running the CAT scan and the lab tests."

OK. I have been doing a series on the church and our relationships with each other. The sad thing about a lot of Christianity is that we will spend all of our time talking about how to straighten out our relationships with God, but we forget about talking about how to straighten out our relationships with other Christians.

It is not enough that we get our doctrine straightened out. That's important. But the whole Bible tells us that in addition we need to get our relationships with each other straightened out. Sadly, the relational side of Christianity – how we treat each other – is too often neglected in the church.

A particularly tragic example of the neglect of our relationships is what happened in Rwanda over the past 20 years. Rwanda, that Central African country, which went through such a slaughter between the Tutsis and the Hutu tribes, were 90% professed Christian. Rwanda was back in the 1970's considered one of the success stories of Christian missionary work. It was a place of revival. People in Rwanda were straightening out their relationships with God. But somehow that didn't translate into transformation regarding historic tribal conflicts and bitter animosity over politics and economics.

See we Christians always need to remember that the symbol of our faith is the cross. And the cross has both a vertical bar speaking to us about straightening out our relationships with God, but it also has a horizontal bar, which talks to us about our relationship to each other.

Some churches are entirely horizontal. It is all about our relationship with each other. There is no understanding about how to straighten out our relationship with God that has been broken by our sin. But other churches are tilted too far the other way. It is all vertical. Their doctrine is lined up perfectly and there are lots of emphasis on offense against God and the substitutionary death of Christ for our sins. But many people in the church are alienated from each other. Their relationships with each other are a low priority. They don't seem to understand that Christianity is essentially relationship – relationship with God and with each other.

These two things are intertwined in the New Testament. So much so, that the apostle John tells us in 1 John 4, "If anyone says 'I love God' and hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother [he is talking about his Christian brother] who he has seen, cannot love God who he has not seen." And he has given us this command, whomever loves God, must also love his brother. There are two bars on the cross – the vertical one and the horizontal one.

There are two great commandments. First, that we should love God with all our hearts, soul, mind and strength. Second, we should love our neighbor as ourselves. Loving God and loving people is the essence of Christianity.

Now, we have been exploring some different models for the Christian church to try to get a handle on this precious creation of Jesus Christ, this thing called the church. We have been looking at different New Testament models. So we explored Paul's use of the metaphor in which he calls the church a field, performing the function of *evangelism*. We looked at Paul's description of the church as a building, performing the function of *edification*, bringing people into maturity. Last week, we considered the church as God's temple, a place of *exaltation* where God is worshipped and where the idols in our lives are destroyed.

Well, this week as we continue to explore some of the metaphors, some of the pictures of the church in the New Testament, I want to talk about the church as being The Family of God.

Sadly, even though the metaphor, the picture of the church as family, is the most frequently used metaphor in the New Testament, that we are to be family

with each other, much of the modern church functions as a business or an institution, a corporation, but not as a family.

I was reading in Leadership Magazine not too long ago, an article by a pastor in which the pastor attempted to change the name of the church he was serving. Here is what he said, "In the spring of 1992, the church board and I decided to make a more specific proposal that we meet on June 27 and vote to change the church's name to City Center Blank Denomination. Our letter calling for the meeting gave the rationale that Full Gospel Tabernacle needed explanation, but City Center Blank described us better since we were the Blank kind of congregation in this downtown area.

At the start of the meeting, we decided to broaden the title to City Center Church subtitled this denomination. But after a full discussion, the vote came back in and only 52% favored the proposed name. Some moved that a committee composed of board members and others representing various ages and interests screen possible names and offer the best choices at the annual meeting in February. This passed easily.

And so they went about selecting people in the congregation that represented various constituencies. They appointed a woman in her 20's, a retired woman, a businessman, someone unemployed, a student and so on to join the board members. Throughout the fall, they talked with groups of individuals. In January of 1993, they presented the leading six names in a letter to members in adherence, asking each person to indicate their first and second choices. They published the top picks for the annual meeting. They held three ballots at the annual meeting, but none of the names garnered the necessary two-thirds majority. So, they voted to table the amendment until the June meeting.

At the June meeting, they had another four ballots and providentially decided to pick the name that was originally proposed.

Is this the way a family does business?

What do you want to eat tonight, children? Let's get the top six choices. Let's appoint some committees. Let's discuss it to death using Roberts Rules of Order. Let's make motions and offer amendments. Have voice votes and table things for further discussions.

If families did this, everyone would starve to death. Is it any wonder that as churches have become more and more institutionalized and have adopted methods from the corporate world, not in handling its finances, but in doing business and relating to each other, is it any wonder why churches are often so ineffective and so lacking in a family feel?

Well, there is a jewel of a letter in the New Testament that speaks to us about what the church is supposed to be like. As we look at the letter today of Paul to Philemon, we are going to consider the church as The Family of God.

Let's pray.

RICH READ PHILEMON

Let me give you some background, as much as I can, to this little letter. Unfortunately, like a lot of Paul's letters, the frustrating thing for us as modern day interpreters is that we are like people who come in in the middle of the movie and leave before the end. So a lot of times we are really guessing at the

occasion that precipitated the letter. Or we are like people who are just listening in on one side of a phone conversation, having to fill in the blanks. Of course, if you are a professor at a seminary, Paul has given you job security because professors spend their lives spinning out theories, writing books and journal articles regarding the occasion of one of these letters. But sometimes, we just don't absolutely know what the occasion is.

Paul says in verse 1, "Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus."

And then in verse 9, "I appeal to you on the basis of love, I then, as Paul, an old man and now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus."

We know that in Judaism in Paul's day, anyone who was 56 or older had entered the seventh stage of life – old age. People just didn't live that long back then. So Paul was in his mid to late 50's when he wrote this and he said that he was a prisoner of Christ Jesus.

In verse 10, he says, "I appeal to you for my son, Onesimus, who became my son while I was in chains." He speaks about his chains again in verse 13. The traditional perspective was that Paul was writing this as a prisoner from Rome. We know that Paul was imprisoned in other cities. We read about Paul's imprisonment in Caesarea and Paul's imprisonment in Ephesus. But the traditional view is that Paul was imprisoned in Rome.

And we don't know exactly what the situation was involving Onesimus, but the generally accepted view is that Onesimus was a run-away slave from his master Philemon, who somehow encountered the apostle Paul and was somehow converted through Paul's ministry. Maybe he had heard about the apostle Paul from his master, Philemon, and he sought him out as someone who, perhaps, could help him. Likely, Philemon spoke very highly of Paul. And so when Onesimus was in trouble, he went to the one person he thought maybe could understand his situation. He went to Paul and visits him in prison. He gets saved and now Paul is sending this slave, this runaway slave, Onesimus back to Philemon.

Now, just again by historical background, we need to understand that ancient slavery is very different from its modern American expression in the South. And while we would not be wise, in any sense, to glamorize the ownership of another human being, or suggest that life as a slave in ancient Rome was easy, nevertheless, Roman slavery was not nearly as perverted or dehumanizing an institution as was the slavery practiced in the American South.

For one thing, slavery in Rome had no racial overtones. There was no stigma attached to an entire race of people. In the American South, you could tell immediately whether someone was a slave or free person just by looking at his or her race. But in Rome, the slaves were gathered from every race of people. And so the baggage of racism and race stigmatization that has lasted 150 years past the end of slavery was never a part of the ancient scene. Slaves mingled with free persons in the market place without stigma or separation.

And slaves in the ancient world were well educated, unlike down South where it was a capital crime to teach a slave to read. In the ancient world, many of the great philosophers and teachers and physicians were slaves. Slaves back in Rome just didn't do manual work. They weren't simply field hands or cooks.

They were found in every occupation. And often they were given a huge amount of responsibility managing the entire estate of a wealthy person, controlling everything but their own freedom.

Finally, slavery in ancient Rome was not a permanent condition. Most typically a person was only a slave until they reached age 30. Then they were set free. But you didn't have the situation of the American South where you might have 8-10 generations of people born into slavery living their whole lives as slaves and dying in slavery.

So while slavery is always a brutal and dehumanizing institution, what Paul was dealing with regarding this runaway slave, Onesimus, was different than what an American abolitionist would have been dealing with if they encountered a runaway slave from the South.

Another point of understanding and then we will look at the text. Having a runaway slave certainly cost Philemon something. It would have brought him shame in his community because he would become known in the community either as someone who couldn't control his slaves, someone who was weak, someone who was not a good overseer, or he would have been known in the community as someone who, perhaps, was brutal and had driven his slave to runaway. Kind treatment of one's slaves was considered a virtue in ancient Rome. So this slave running away would have brought suspicion on Philemon's good name and reputation in the community.

Moreover, it would have cost him financially. He would have lost help, the help of Onesimus. He would have had to purchase a replacement. Slavery was part of the fabric of ancient Roman life. It was how everything got done. And while people with sensitive consciences would have recognized there was something with only another human being, it was hard for them to conceive of a world without slaves.

How would we get our meals? Who would grow our crops? Who would teach us in school? Who would do our philosophy?

If I can use an illustration, we recognize that automobiles, factories and utility companies produce pollution. People with a sensitive conscience understand that that is a bad thing. But most of us can't conceive of a world without cars or factories or utility companies. How would we get around? How would we get what we wear and what we eat? How would we function with out electricity?

Well, this was the view, the environment into which Paul was writing. He was dealing with a generally accepted practice in society, where a slave owner who would have suffered shame and financial loss, a runaway slave who had become a Christian. And he needs to address this most difficult situation in a way that brings the principles of Christ into that particular culture at that particular time.

I want you to note, first of all, to whom the letter is addressed. We read in verse 1, "Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, to Philemon, our dear friend and fellow worker, to Apphia our sister, [probably Philemon's wife] to Archippus our fellow soldier and to the church that meets in your house, Grace and peace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

It is striking to say in the least that this note regarding Philemon and his runaway slave was not written as an exclusively private note to Philemon. The

whole church is communicated with as participants in the decision regarding how Philemon treats this slave.

Up until the third century, we don't have any evidence of special buildings being constructed for Christian gatherings. So we have no evidence in the 1st Century of a church building being exclusively used for church gatherings. Rather, in the 1st Century, the gatherings of Christians took place in people's homes. And assuming that Philemon was moderately well to do, the entertaining room in his home would have comfortably sat 30 people, perhaps up to 45 people. If the meeting spilled over into the atrium, there may have been as many as 70 people. But the average church in the 1st Century allowed for 35-45 people.

And Paul includes the church, these 35-45 people that met in Philemon's home. He said, "and to the church that meets in your home." He includes this home fellowship group – what we would call their kinship group in the discussion.

What I see is that Paul's communication with the whole kinship group immediately pokes our American individualism and isolationism in the eye. You see, we Americans believe in a very privatized faith. See, in America right now, not only is our Christianity a private matter, but there are whole tracks of our life that are simply off limits to other people's input or scrutiny or correction.

In the 1st Century Christians functioned as part of an extended family. They didn't have tons of secrets from each other. And these huge areas of life were shielded from everyone else's input, prayer, concern and correction. In the 1st Century people believed that their spiritual well being was dependent upon living in the light and in fellowship with other people.

But today we are living in an entirely different situation. And most Christians believe that they can and should be free to manage their lives without any particular thought whatever regarding what other Christians would think about what they were doing or how it might affect other people. Hey, it's Jesus and me. But don't talk to me about opening up my life to others. We have these vast domains of life that are purely private—like our marriages, or our child rising. God forbid that you should approach a parent, however sensitively you do it, however tactfully you speak, regarding how his or her child behaved. Very often you will get an incredibly cold reception.

The notion that we are extended family and can assist one another to do a great job of parenting our kids, or a great job at marriage, that we need other people's input has just been blasted out of the American Christian's mindset.

Let me ask you a personal question – those of you who believe that you are followers of Christ – do you believe that you would be more likely to do what Christ wants you to do, say in the area of your finances? If your finances were disclosed to other Christians, or if they were totally kept hidden – if your real commitment was following Jesus Christ, would you be more likely to do Christ's will if your giving patterns were disclosed to some other Christians and your spending habits were disclosed to other Christians; or involve other Christians out of your finances and said, "Bug off, this is a totally private matter."

The answer for me is really simple. I know that in virtually every area of my life, if I were really serious about following Jesus Christ, I would do better as a

Christian with the involvement of others rather than treating domains of my life as purely private matters.

One of the men's groups in our church decided to take the issue of finances seriously. So this group of guys, who had been meeting together and building trust with one another for a year or two, they actually took their tax returns and shared them with each other. Talk about something that is totally counter to the American mindset. How dare someone ask to see my tax return? Well, no one asked to see each other's tax returns. It wasn't some requirement. These guys just voluntarily did it in order to give input concerning this major area of Christian obedience and what we do with out money.

I have for about 20 years thought that it would be good to have a group of Christian men and women meet together who had one thing in common – that they were all well to do and were committed to assist one another in the handling of their financial resources for the sake of Christ. I have long believed that the talents of money in the church are vastly underutilized for the cause of Christ. Because those of us who are well off, seal off our finances from the challenges, input, and prayers from our Christian brothers and sisters. We make these private decisions that aren't nearly radical enough. We bury some of this talent that we have to make money and to have money. We bury some of it in the ground. But I have thought for years that if a group could be formed simply of the well to do, so that people would be free from the fear that the poor in their midst were simply envious of their position or judging them. But people who were of equal status with each other economically decided to disclose their finances to each other and open up their lives to challenge – what an unbelievable opportunity to release resource for the kingdom of God.

Talk about the forward progress of Christian world missions. **Some major new thrust in the inner cities of our country. The development of training centers or projects.** Why don't we do this?

Why do we seal off our marriages, our parenting, our financial life, our sexual life, and our home buying decisions, our vocational decisions, and our retirement decisions? Why do we seal all of these things off into a private realm here in America? I will tell you why. There is one reason why I seal it off -- control. So long as it is private, I am the lord of that area. I am the absolute dictator and master of my fate. But the moment it comes into the light, I am no longer completely in control. I am vulnerable to the opinions of others.

The truth is that if you and I were serious about obedience to the Lord Jesus Christ, then we would function in our kinship groups, our men's groups, our women's groups as more like an extended family without these private realms.

Let me underline what I am saying here. There is a fantastic critique of American individualism and isolationism edited by the University of Berkeley's professor of sociology, Robert Bellah, a book called Habits of the Heart, in which he studies American commitment to simply do life on our own without the help or input or support or correction of other people. In America we have as a plank of doctrine that we sink or swim by our own wits and so we are hesitant to join groups. We quit groups very easily. At the center of American life is the autonomous individual choosing their own destiny and making their own way.

Friends, honestly, I believe that it is American individualism, this isolation of each person from other people, that is at the root of all the spiritual failures that you see in the church today – whether they are pastoral failures, leadership failures or we are talking about church members who seem to start spiritually well, people you know who seemed sincerely converted, but whose lives end up just as smashed on the rocks of some particular sin or some involvement. If you get to the root of why American Christians live shallow Christian lives and often don't seem to endure well to the end, the root of it is because I think our whole framework is wrong. Instead of living out Christianity as part of an extended family of other believers, instead of having a few people who know us and can speak to and challenge us and we can do the same with them, instead of that, we try to gut out the Christian life on our own. And we find we don't have the resource to gut it out on our own.

So Paul, when he is dealing with the issue of Philemon's property, this slave, Onesimus, and how Philemon is to relate to him, he doesn't say, "Look, this is a matter just between you and your slave." He says, "This is a family matter, so let's talk about it."

So let's look at Paul's assumption that the house church where Philemon was functioning as host and, perhaps, as leader, but that the house church was his extended family. The notion of church as family runs through Paul's letter.

Look at verse 1, "Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus and Timothy, our brother, to Philemon our dear friend and fellow worker, to Apphia, our sister."

Look down at verse 7, "Your love has given me great joy and encouragement because you, brother, have refreshed the hearts of the saints."

Sister-brother language.

And in verse 10, "I appeal to you for my son, Onesimus..."

And in verse 16, "That you might have him back for good no longer 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 man and as a brother in the Lord."

Verse 20, "I do wish, brother, that I might have some benefit for you in the Lord. Refresh my heart in Christ."

Throughout this letter, Paul uses the language of family – brother, sister, son. In other letters he talks about being a spiritual father, a spiritual mother. He makes appeals on the basis of love.

Verse 7, "Your love has given me great encouragement."

Verse 9, "I appeal to you on the basis of love."

Verse 16, "He is very dear to me."

The whole backdrop of the exhortation that he is going to give to this individual, Philemon, is family relationship. I can speak this way to you, Paul is saying, because we are brothers. There are some things that I could not to someone who was not part of my family. It would be too awkward. It would be read the wrong way. It would be too threatening. But to my wife, to my children, to my sisters, to my mother, to my father – based on our relationship to each other we can make certain appeals to one another.

When we say the church is a family, I called this message "The Family of God", what do I mean?

Years ago there was a woman named Edith Schaefer who was the wife of one of the most influential Christians in this century. Edith was the wife of Francis Schaefer. If you are not familiar with Francis Schaefer, you should become familiar with him and his writings, among the more important Christian writings in this last quarter of the 20th Century.

Edith wrote a book that is now 25 years old called What is a Family. In this book Edith gave a number of different word pictures for a family. One of the word pictures that she uses for family is a "family is a place to nurse the sick back to health." You have children who are sick and they have a fever and it is in the family that their bed is changed and they get out of their bedclothes and change their pajamas. And you bathe them down with cool water and buy them sucking candies for their sore throats.

It is in the family that elderly parents are cared for and are nursed to health in their sickness. And husbands and wives nurse each other to health. If you were sick, you would have liked to have my wife, Marlene, as your mother. Because I don't know anyone more nurturing than she is.

When our kids were sick it was like the happiest times of their lives because she would set them up on the couch with their pillows, comic books, soup, games and candy. "Mom, I am sick again. Hooray!"

Well, if the church is to be an extended family, then one way to understand our role in each other's life is that this is to be a place that nurses the sick back to health. Not as a hospital would nurse the sick with impersonal care and services, but with family attention. Jesus said that he came not for the well, but for the sick. It is not the well that need a physician, but the sick, the sin sick. The people who are sick and tired of the way they are living. Entering our church family are lots of people coming in with a variety of spiritual sicknesses. This person is incredibly wounded from a divorce of his parents. And that woman is sin sick from her promiscuity. And another person is sick from the bitterness of their abuse in a former marriage or the injustice of a divorce settlement. And some come in and are sick and tired of the way they have been living and the emptiness of their lives.

And it is in our home fellowship groups, our kinships, and our women's groups that the sick are to be nursed and cared for back to health.

And family is to be a shelter from the storm, from all the storms that break in life. This week we have been exposed to news report after news report of that hurricane that hit the entire east coast of the United States. Where do you run when you are hit by the storms of life? You run for refuge into the arms of your church family. Jesus said, "Come to me all of you who are weary and heavy laden and I will give you rest."

Family is to be the one place in the world where if you are a total failure, you are a screw up, you are facing the storm of your own stupidity, a storm of your own making, that you can run to family and they will accept you.

Do you understand what it means that we in the church are to be an extended family offering refuge to people who are hit by storms? We are not just trying to multiply meetings, let's just have another church activity during the week from Wednesday at 7-9:30. Let's sit around in a nice little group with a piece of pie on

our knee and a cup of coffee saying that we are fellowshiping with each other and flipping back and forth in our bibles.

People are being blasted by storms and we must have hundreds of refuges in this church for those who have been taken apart by a breakup with their girlfriend or boyfriend; for those who are reeling from the pain of a child's rebellion or a child's disability; or the disability of a parent or spouse; or who are fearful because they are widows or widowers; or folks who are simply beaten up by the world.

You know, there are lots of Christians in this church who are really trying to be faithful and stand up for Christ in their college and high school classrooms, in their workplaces, in their neighborhoods and in their extended families. And every once in a while they get pounded on as they are pressing the edge of risk that it is in the context of the extended family that they can run to their brothers and sisters and say, "I am hurting. I just got beaten up. I need you guys as a refuge, a comfort."

And family is a training ground for relationships. How is it that we pass along our cultural capital so that the next generation is not simply a bunch of barbarians? Where does it happen that a child learns to function in the larger world and relate to other people a civilized human being? Where does it happen, if it happens? It happens in family.

So many people are entering our church family severely lacking in life skills or even social skills because their family was not a training ground for handling life. But this place, your women's group, your men's group, your ministry group, your kinship group can be a place to learn life skills.

In a good family, the family will teach their children about how to handle failure. They will teach their kids that failure is a part of life. You don't quit on baseball or in the band or in school. You don't quit the drama society or a job just because you encounter difficulty, just because you haven't been liked or you haven't been picked or you haven't done well. Good families will teach their children to keep going, to pick themselves up, to continue with the job or the sport or the musical instrument or school.

Lots of people who are coming into our church family have never had anyone teach them how not to quit.

A good family will train their kids how to tell the truth, to not cover up, to not exaggerate, to not selectively tell stories, to be as accurate as possible, even when it is personally embarrassing. There are lots of folks who are entering our church family who have never been trained to simply tell the truth. There are lots of families who function simply as a collective lie, where everyone lies to everyone else. Everyone covers up. Everyone plays pretend. Where do people learn to tell the truth?

In the extended family called the church.

It is in the extended family called the church that men and women learn healthy non-sexual ways of relating to members of the opposite sex. Some men and women who come into our extended church family have never learned how to simply have a healthy non-sexual relationship with someone of the opposite sex. People need family.

There was a movie years ago called Little Man Tate. It was about a little boy who was a genius. His mother was a blue-collar worker and not well educated. This boy goes off to live with this highly educated woman who offers him all kinds of educational stimulation and learning experiences and money. But when the kid has nightmares, this highly educated woman offers him advice, cold counsel, but no hugs, no comfort. The difference between the educated woman and his mother, while the educated woman could offer skills and services, only his mother could offer him love.

Listen, the church is to function more like a mother and less like an educative service provider. It is here that we should experience fatherly, motherly, sisterly, brotherly hug and touch in your small groups and your informal connections with each other. We are family.

And you know there is this little thing that makes family relationships happen. It is the lubricant, the oil that causes relationships to happen well. It is something that has almost been entirely ripped away from our culture. It is a little thing called manners. If you read through this letter, what you will see is that Paul exercises so much tact in speaking to Philemon. He appeals to him as a friend. He models for him the giving up of rights by calling himself a prisoner. He calls Philemon a partner in verse 17.

There is a book that I would like to commend to your attention and to your reading. It is a book by Donald McCullough called "Say Please, Say Thank You." It is a book about manners written by a Christian. By manners, he is not talking about what salad fork you use at a formal sit-down dinner to eat your bib lettuce or where you sit the mother in law at a wedding. If you want to know about doing things in a classy way, you can read Miss Manners in the newspaper or Emily Post. When Donald McCullough is speaking about manners, he means the ways we show each other that we believe this other person is worthy of respect.

The cover story of an article in the US Today was titled Excuse Me, But Whatever Happened to Manners? The article noted how impossible it was to ignore the growing rudeness, even harshness of American life. An overwhelming majority of Americans, 89%, in a US News and World Report poll thinks that incivility is a serious problem. 3 out of 4 said that it has gotten worse in the past 10 years.

It is impossible to not note the growing rudeness and crudeness of our culture, the continual lowering of our standard of interaction, the foulness of speech everywhere you go. You drive down the road and someone has their 400-watt car radio speakers cranked up and they are spewing vulgarities from the speakers as they drive down the road singing a song about rape. There is simply a lack of care for other people's sensibilities. There is this in your face attitude coarseness that runs through music and movies and TV and humor, what people wear on their T-shirts and what they put on bumper stickers. Our road rages; our gun battles.

And all of it collectively communicates that we, as a culture, have lost sight of the dignity of other people or that other people are worthy of our respect.

But Paul, coming from a Christian worldview, treats Philemon as someone worthy of respect. Look at how he does it. First of all, he doesn't force Philemon

to make a decision regarding Onesimus in one direction or another. In verse 8 he says, "Although in Christ, I could be bold and order you to do what you ought to do." He is an apostle. He does have authority to make orders. But Paul says, "Yet, I appeal to you on the basis of love. I then, as Paul, an old man and now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus, I appeal to you for my son, Onesimus."

He bends over backwards to avoid any hint of authoritarianism. He wants his friend to do what is right, not because he is afraid or has been pushed into it, but because of his love for Christ.

Do you know how we treat each other well? When you allow your Christian brother or sister, someone else in your extended church family, when you allow other people the freedom to say "no" to you. We all like to play God. We all harbor in our hearts this little Hitler, this little Saddam Hussein to push people around and make them do what we want them to do. We can either order them to do it, if we have the authority or some of us can get people to do what we want them to do by manipulating them, by whining, by cajoling, by flirting.

But I love the fact that Paul gives Philemon the dignity of being a person created in the image of God by allowing him the right to say "no." No, I am not going to set him free. He may be a brother, but he is still my property. He is still a slave.

And friends, that is the way we need to do business here in the church. If you make a request of someone else, you must give him or her the liberty and permission to turn you down.

Paul understands the power of words. He chooses the words in his letter so carefully, so tactfully. He speaks about his heart and calls him his dear friend. He talks about his love for him and speaks about his affection. When we treat each other as being worthy of respect, we will be much more careful about the power of our words.

You can't be a Christian and not understand how significant words are in the plan of God. God created the world by words. He said at the beginning of time, "Let there be light and there was light." Hundreds of times we read the phrase "and God said".

Words are key to our relationships. We can't function as family without watching what comes out of our mouth.

Can you think back to your childhood where someone said something to you that was powerful for good, a warm memory?

I remember when I was in third grade – I grew up in a very difficult home, certainly not as difficult as some of the homes some of you were raised in, but more difficult than most. I had a third grade teacher who I loved. I adored her. But she got pregnant and in those days when a teacher began to show, they had to leave school. I guess they thought it might be spreading that the kids would learn something. On the day she was saying goodbye to us and we were going to get a new teacher, I was very sad. I was sitting in the middle of the classroom probably looking really sad as she was saying goodbye. And then in front of everyone, she called me forward. She sat me on her lap and she put her arms around me and she whispered in my ear, "Richard, if I have a little boy I hope he

grows up to be just like you.” And she gave me a kiss. Wow, what powerful words!

I was born with a little birth defect. My left eye doesn't go left of center. It is a pretty common problem, but there is something wrong with one of the muscles in my eyes. I remember when I was about 10 years old this kid and I got into a fight. He looked at me and said, “You're nothing but a little cross-eyed monkey.” Those words went into me like a spear.

Who doesn't know the power of words -- for good or for bad? Who hasn't at some point in their life had something about them made fun of -- Your freckles? Your hair? Your ears? Your weight? Your height? Your name? Your home? Your stutter?

At the turn of the century there was a little boy at a small village in Croatia named Josip Broz, who was helping a priest at mass. This little boy, Josip, accidentally dropped a cruet of wine. It smashed to pieces. The village priest screamed at him and berated him saying, “Leave the altar, you stupid boy, and don't come back.” The boy never returned to the church. He grew up to be Marshall Tito, the communist dictator of Yugoslavia, a dictator for 40 years, who hated the church.

About the same time in St. Mary's Cathedral in Peoria, Illinois, an altar boy named Peter John was helping a priest with a mass. He, too, dropped a cruet of wine and later he wrote, “There was no atomic explosion that can equal the intensity in decibels in noise and explosive force of a wine cruet falling on the marble floor in the presence of the Bishop. I was frightened to death.” The celebrant at mass that morning was a Bishop named John Spalding and with a warm twinkle in his eye, the Bishop whispered, “Son, one day you will be what I am.” That altar boy grew up to be the Archbishop Fulton Sheen, who is probably the most loved Catholic priest by Roman Catholics in this Century.

The power of words. If we want to provide family here, we are going to recognize the power of our words.

And it is in this context of the church as family that we are going to see people transformed. Paul writes in verse 11, “Formerly he was useless to you, but now he has become useful both to you and to me.”

Onesimus became a Christian and Paul was doing a little play on the name Onesimus. He said, “and though he was formerly useless, he became what his name is – useful.”

It is interesting in the Greek, the word for useless is “Achrestos” – it is pronounced exactly like “Achristos” which means Christless. Onesimus' uselessness formerly, was due to his Christlessness. Onesimus was without use, because he was without Christ. But when he became a Christian, suddenly he discovered his purpose and his usefulness in life.

I am going to finish with this story. I talked with an elderly gentleman who was a guest here last week at one of our services. The short of the matter is that he asked me to pray with him about some difficulties in his life. In the course of conversation, I had the opportunity to introduce him to Jesus Christ. And, oh, he met Jesus. One of the ways that I knew that he had met Jesus was he looked up

after he prayed and he said to me, “Rich, what I really want for the rest of my life is to just be useful. I just want my life to be useful.”

We are family. The church is the extended family of God. And in this context, as we discover Jesus Christ, and as we open up our lives to each other, we find our usefulness and our purpose.

Let's pray.