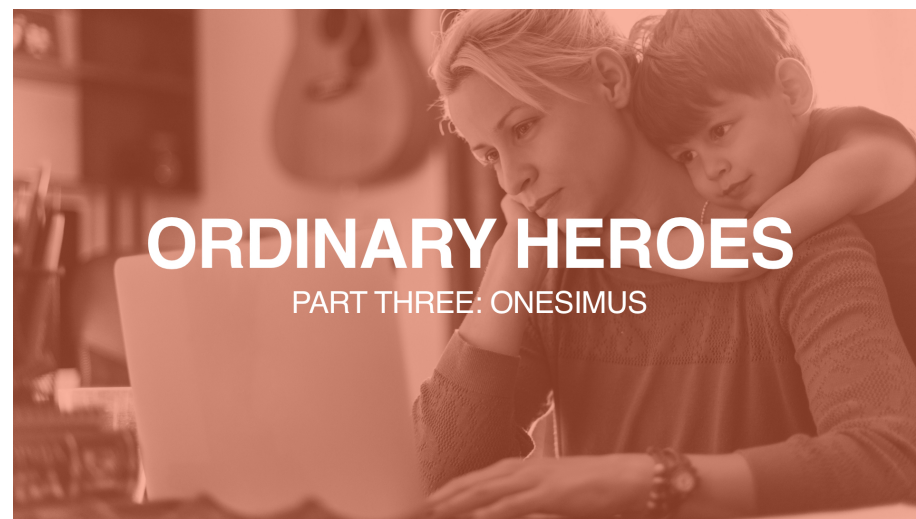


7. What happens when we pursue social injustice apart from the gospel?
8. What happens when we try to pursue the gospel but fail to be agents of social change?
9. How would you like to see the gospel change you?
10. How would you like to see God use you as an agent of change in the world we live in?



SUNDAY, AUGUST 27, 2017

360 DISCUSSION GUIDE



When we first met Onesimus he is over a thousand miles from home. He was probably looking over his shoulder the entire journey, because he was a fugitive from Romans law—a runaway slave. The first step he took from his home in Colossae was a capital offense. Every step after, a further indictment. Rome would be the perfect place to lose himself in a crowd.

Somewhere. Somehow. He spots a familiar face in the crowd. The man is flanked by a Roman guard, but he seems to be moving about freely. Onesimus' first impulse is to hide, but something compels him to step out of the shadows.

From the moment Onesimus reached out his hand and Paul received it, the senior statesman and spokesman for the Christian faith, already under indictment by Rome, would become a co-conspirator.

For the next few weeks (possibly months) Onesimus was Paul's constant companion. He found a joy in serving Paul that he had never known in his master's house. Somewhere in the course of their conversation, Onesimus crossed a line. He experienced the transforming power of Jesus, that Paul so fondly and so often spoke of.

Everything in him was changing. Including his desire to face his past. With Paul's encouragement he headed back to Philemon with a short letter in his hand that would change the course of human history.

Paul's letter to Philemon gives us incredible insight into how the gospel changes all of our relationships and turns pervading social structures on their head.

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(Have your group read Paul's letter to Philemon before proceeding with the study)

A HORRIFIC BLINDSPOT (vv. 1-7)

Paul has fond memories of Philemon as a dear friend and genuine partner in the gospel. You can sense the sincerity and affection in Paul's prayer. This is not mere flattery. Paul, however, recognizes a huge blindspot in Philemon's application of the gospel, and prays that his active involvement in the faith will take him to a deeper place.

VERSES 1-3: Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, To Philemon our dear friend and fellow worker—² also to Apphia our sister and Archippus our fellow soldier—and to the church that meets in your home: ³ Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

VERSES 4-7: I always thank my God as I remember you in my prayers, ⁵ because I hear about your love for all his holy people and your faith in the Lord Jesus. ⁶ I pray that your partnership with us in the faith may be effective in deepening your understanding of every good thing we share for the sake of Christ. ⁷ Your love has given me great joy and encouragement, because you, brother, have refreshed the hearts of the Lord's people.

1. Paul has several commendable things to say about Philemon. Take the time to underline each of these in the passages above. How would you summarize Philemon's character as Paul describes it in the opening lines of the letter that bears his name?
2. How could someone who Paul describes in such glowing terms have such a huge blindspot when it came to applying the gospel to his relationship with Philemon?
3. What are some of the blindspots we may have in spite of our genuine affection for the Lord?
4. What are some of the blindspots we may have particularly in the matters of racial equality and social injustice?
5. In verse 6, Paul prays that Philemon's "partnership with us in the faith may be effective in deepening your understanding of every good thing we share for the sake of Christ."
 - a. What do you think Paul means by "partnership with us in the faith?"

- b. How would you describe "every good thing we share for the sake of Christ?"
- c. How does our partnership with other believers in the faith effectively deepen our understanding of "every good thing we share for the sake of Christ?"
- d. How does our ever keeping understanding "of every good thing we share for the sake of Christ" change the relational dynamics in the world we live in?"
- e. How did Paul hope it would change the relational dynamic between Philemon and Onesimus?

THE POWER FOR REAL CHANGE (vv. 12-17)

Neither Paul, nor Jesus, nor any other New Testament writer engage in a full frontal assault on the institution of slavery. They simply unleash the power of the gospel and the changed relationships that follow in its wake as the single power that will ultimately obliterate all social injustices.

VERSES 12-17: 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. ¹⁷ So if you consider me a partner, welcome him as you would welcome me.

1. How does Paul describe Onesimus in verses 12-17?
2. What does Paul want Philemon to do in regard to Onesimus?
3. Paul asks Philemon to consider Onesimus "dear to him, both as a fellow man and as a brother in the Lord." How should each of these perspectives have shaped the way Philemon viewed Onesimus?
4. How is Paul asking far more of Philemon than he simply forgive Onesimus?
5. How is Paul asking far more of Philemon than he simply free Onesimus?
6. How does the gospel, and the changed relationships that follow in its wake, have the power to obliterate all social injustice?

