

## DON'T LET THE PAST REMIND US OF WHAT WE ARE NOT NOW"

### 1 PETER 2:1-12

I have mentioned this title to you before. It comes from the song Suite: Judy Blue Eyes. It was called Suite because it was a collection of songs like you might find a number of rooms in a suite at a hotel. I had the opportunity to think about this saying again when I did the funeral for an old friend in Griffin named Jim Lee. In his Bible I found this quote written on one of the pages and it brought back memories of him and the good time we had together when he sat in church with me. One Sunday he flashed me his tie which was a black tie with daffy duck yelling at me with a huge tongue sticking out at me. The text today is a statement of this title. But there is another book by Paul that is an illustration of this wonderful truth and that is what I would like to talk about most. First lets look at 1 Peter 2:10. It says "Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God." Focus on these two phrases— once you were ..... but now you are.. Don't let the past (what you once were) remind you of what you are not now (but now you are). John Claypoole was a high church Baptist minister. He got burned out at a 5000 member church in Texas and became pastor of a 500 member Baptist church right across from my church in Jackson, Mississippi. John was brilliant. He told a story often of how he was always trying to please his mother. He said he would get to the top of the heap like in school or be the pastor of a large church. Then he would look down at his mother and says, "is it OK NOW for John to be John?" And he realized that he thought he was a nobody trying to be a somebody when in reality he was a SOMEBODY but was acting like he was a nobody. It is easy to think that way especially when your circumstances are not conducive to a positive life. There are literally millions who think this way and it is a stronghold hard to break.

Consider this man. He was frustrated beyond endurance. All his goals, purposes, dreams, and ambitions were locked up with him in a tiny jail cell, and his heart was full of a cold emptiness. He was a smoker, and cigarettes weren't allowed in the center. Instead, he smuggled in tobacco and rolled it in the pages of the Gideon Bible. One day he fell asleep while smoking. He awoke to find to find that the cigarette had burned out, and all that remained was a scrap of charred paper. He unrolled it and read what was written; "Saul, Saul Why do you persecute me?"

Jacob asked for another Bible and read the entire story of the conversion of Saul of Tarsus. He suddenly realized that if God could help someone like Saul, God could help him, too. There in his cell he knelt and prayed, asking Christ to come into his life and change him. He began crying and couldn't stop. The tears of a wasted life washed away his pain, and God redeemed him. He started sharing his story with the other prisoners, and as soon as he was released he became involved in a Church. He met a Christian woman, married her, and is now a missionary in the Far East where he tells people far and wide, "Who would have believed that I could find the truth by smoking the word of God?"

This is the picture of a man greatly changed—changed by Christ. It shows us the difference that conversion should make in a life and just how we should receive a person who has been converted. There is a book in the Bible that is really an illustration yet it does teach us to believe that once we were... but now we are. Onesimus was a slave and a thief and Paul wrote to Philemon, his owner, concerning Onesimus as his slave.. Few people would ever want to be seen with a slave much less be known as a brother to him. Yet, this is exactly what we are about

to see. No matter how low and base a person is, we are to reach out to him and do all we can to bring that person into the fellowship of Christ and the church. This is a strong picture of a man changed by Christ. A person who once was but now is.

Paul wanted to make a special request of Philemon. He had the right to demand that Philemon grant the request. Why? How can any believer, even a minister, demand that another believer do anything, especially if the believer differs or does not wish to do what is requested? There are two reasons: It is the right thing to do, and it is a believer's duty to do it.

A believer, no matter who he is, should do the right thing; he should do his duty. Therefore, Paul had the right to make a special request of Philemon. Paul did not demand that Philemon grant the request. Philemon should, but Paul did not demand it. Instead he appealed, urged, and pleaded with Philemon because he loved Philemon. Note that Paul based his plea upon three things that should appeal to the heart of any believer.

Paul based his appeal upon love: the love of Christ and the love of believers for each other. This should mean that Philemon loved Paul as a brother in Christ, loved him enough to grant the request. Paul based his appeal upon his age. He was apparently in his fifties and no doubt his body was somewhat more aged than the average person because of the wear and tear upon his body from the sufferings that had been inflicted upon him through the years.

Paul based his appeal upon the fact that he was a prisoner for the cause of Christ. He had suffered so much in order to carry the gospel to the lost of the world, to people who were hopeless and lost just as Philemon and his family had been. Because he was a prisoner for Christ, Philemon should grant his request. Paul was tired and worn, about to close his ministry and life upon earth; therefore, he expected his dear friends to heed his last request.

What was Paul's request? It concerned Onesimus, a former slave of Philemon, a slave who had run away to gain his freedom and had fled to Rome. Imagine Onesimus having just returned to Philemon and having handed this letter to Philemon —and Philemon standing there reading this letter. What were his thoughts? What was the impact upon Philemon, the slave owner who had been converted to Christ? What would he do now? There standing before him was a former slave who had broken the law by running away, broken one of the major laws upon which the Roman empire was built. (Rome kept the peace by enslaving and scattering the people of conquered nations all over the world, breaking their loyalty to their homeland. Death was the punishment for runaway slaves.)

Onesimus was a changed man, a man who had been "begotten," that is, born again. Paul had led Onesimus to the Lord. Remember that Paul was in prison. How then did Paul come in contact with Onesimus? Was Onesimus recognized as a runaway slave while in Rome and imprisoned himself? No! He could not have been, for he was not in prison. He had returned and was moving about freely and was now standing before his owner, Philemon. When Onesimus reached Rome, he had most likely ran across some Christian believers, and they had befriended him and introduced him to Paul. Paul then led him to Christ.

Paul did not pulled any punches. He readily admitted the wrong that Onesimus had done: he had been unprofitable, that is, useless. The idea is absolutely of no use, just good for nothing. But

now he was profitable. He had accepted Christ and he was of the greatest use to Philemon and to Paul for the kingdom of Christ.

Jesus Christ changes lives. He can take a useless, unprofitable, good for nothing person and make the most useful, profitable, and good person imaginable. Jesus Christ can take nothing and make something out of any person. Jesus Christ can change a person and make him the most useful person in the world. How? Jesus Christ takes a person and creates him anew. Christ gives the person a new birth, makes a new creature, a new man out of him. Onesimus came back to his master carrying this letter Paul had written. He had no reason to believe that Philemon would heed Paul's request. He could be enslaved again or even killed for what he had done. Onesimus was crazy. All his people would say he is crazy. He was crazy, crazy in love with God.

### SOME SCRIPTURES TO CONSIDER

"But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name: which were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God" (John 1:12-13).

"Jesus answered and said unto him, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God....Jesus answered, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God" (John 3:3, 5).

"Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new" (2 Cor. 5:17).

Onesimus faced his past in order to right his wrong. This is clear evidence that the heart of Onesimus had been truly converted to Christ. He wanted to return and right the wrong he had done. Christ always does this to a person when he is truly converted.

I have a friend I worked with in ministry years ago. He got into drugs and was kicked out of the group. One thing led to another and he was hiding out in Thomaston from the police. The Lord got him and made him turn himself in to the Jackson police where he would serve a sentence of 9 months. He turned himself in order to right his wrongs so he could go on and resume his ministry. People told him he was crazy. Man do not do that but he turned himself in and instead of 9 months he was out in 31 days.

That man who turned himself in was like Onesimus, he was a changed man. And what a change he had experienced. He had been changed by the hand of God, that is, under the providence of God. Paul tells Philemon that Onesimus had left for just a brief time so that he could return forever. God was overlooking and overruling the whole event for the sake of Onesimus' salvation. Philemon was now able to be associated with Onesimus forever. The implication is that both shall live forever with Christ, worshiping and serving Christ throughout all eternity. He had been changed from a slave to a brother—a dearly "beloved brother." Paul says: Onesimus had left as a slave, but he was now above a slave, was now a beloved brother, was now of great value to Paul, and was now of much more value to Philemon.

The point is well made: when Christ changes a life, the life is changed eternally. Earthly relationships are changed forever. The changed person becomes a beloved brother. It does not matter what the relationship has been. If the person has been truthfully changed by Christ, then he is to be received as a beloved brother. Why? Because God has put His hand upon the person and changed him forever. SCRIPTURES TO THINK ABOUT

"A new commandment I give unto you, that ye love one another; as I have loved you, that ye also love one another. By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another" (John 13:34-35).

"Let love be without hypocrisy. Abhor that which is evil; cleave to that which is good" (Romans 12:9).

Onesimus was to be received and trusted as much as Paul himself. Paul makes an astounding request. He asked Philemon to receive a slave who was a lawless thief just as he would receive himself. Paul boldly stepped forward and asked that Onesimus, the slave and thief, be received as a partner and brother.

Remember the Rich Young Ruler? He asked Jesus what he needed to do to be his follower? Jesus said, "have you kept the commandments?" The Rich Young Ruler assured Jesus that he had. Then Jesus said, sell all that you have and come follow me. Then the Rich Young Ruler turned and walked away because he was very wealthy." Jesus did not want that mans' money. He did not need his wealth. What Jesus wanted was that man himself.

The one thing that people need above all else is to be accepted and then to love God like crazy. No matter how low or base, useless and unprofitable, sinful and derelict, crippled and diseased, ugly and unattractive, unapproachable and distasteful—a person needs to be received and brought into the fellowship of Christ and believers. For too long, the church and believers have shunned people like Onesimus. We must always remember: we are debtors to Christ and to the world, every man, woman, and child. Christ has saved us and given us the fellowship with Himself and God the Father and with one another. Therefore, we are spiritual debtors to all. We are ment to do crazy love things like going back to your master and face certain death. We are ment to surrender akk.

The name Onesimus means "useful." Once he was useless but now he is useful. How about you? How about our church? Isn't time we became more and more useful?