

# GOING DEEPER

## DISCUSSION GUIDE

July 3, 2016



### THE POWER OF GENTLENESS

## Discussion Guide

### The Currency of Gentleness

**Connecting:**  
45 minutes

(The following questions are intended to provide your group with a way of connecting with one another so that you might partner in the work God is doing in your lives.)

- IN WHAT WAYS DID GOD MOVE IN YOUR LIFE THIS WEEK? IN WHAT WAYS DID YOU RESPOND TO HIM?
- WHAT WAS YOUR BIGGEST CHALLENGE THIS WEEK? IN WHAT WAYS, IF ANY, DID YOU INVITE GOD INTO THIS CHALLENGE?

- How HONEST HAVE YOU BEEN WITH US? (GRACIOUSLY THANK GROUP MEMBERS FOR THEIR HONESTY IF THEY STATE THEY HAVE HELD BACK.)

**Getting Started:**  
10 minutes

- What do people typically look to receive from the people in their lives? To what lengths are they willing to go to get these things? Could you explain?

**Diving Into the Text:**  
60 minutes

(The following questions are intended to provide your group with a

simple road map through the text. Feel free to use these questions in ways that best fit your group and the dynamics of your own meeting.)

USING THE NOTES, DISCUSS THE BACKGROUND OF LUKE 9 HIGHLIGHTING THE MESSIANIC HOPES OF THOSE WITH JESUS.

- Using the notes, discuss the background of slavery in the ancient world and the context of Paul's letter to Philemon.
- Read Philemon slowly, out loud. Pause. Read the text once more, seeking to hear the text as Philemon, a man wronged by his slave.
- What is Paul looking to receive from Philemon? In what ways is he seeking these things? Seek to find as many examples as possible in the text.
- Is Paul's agenda with his friend Philemon similar or dissimilar to our agendas with our friends? Is his means for achieving this agenda like or unlike our means? Could you elaborate?
- Imagine you are Philemon, hearing Paul's letter for the first time. What effect do his words have upon you? Could you explain?
- React to the following statement: Paul doesn't use force with Philemon because the Kingdom of God doesn't grow by force. It grows through the acceptance of a gentle invitation.
- What might it look like to desire the growth of God's Kingdom in those with whom we are connected?
- What, if anything, keeps us from relating to people in this manner?
- What might it look like to open these areas of our hearts up to the transforming work of the Holy Spirit? What might it look like to encourage one another in this journey?

## CONTEXT AND BACKGROUND

### SLAVERY

Slavery in the ancient world differed greatly from American chattel slavery pre-Civil War. In the ancient world, slavery was not based upon one's race. A person could become a slave by birth, through war, as the outcome of extreme debt, or by choosing to sell oneself into slavery. While slaves did not have the same standing as free persons, their status was tied to that of their master. Thus, the slaves of a master who enjoyed high status also enjoyed a high status. Slaves could

accumulate property and possessions. Some even possessed their own slaves! Many slaves were highly educated and filled important roles such as doctors, accountants, secretaries, and property managers. In many cases in the Greco-Roman world, slaves were emancipated by age thirty though they remained bound to their masters, continuing to benefit them through their work as free persons. Slavery was never really questioned in the ancient world with the economy of every ancient culture depending upon the existence of slavery because slaves did the work which modern machines do today.

While slaves in the ancient world experienced a higher level of standing and livelihood than American slaves or modern persons trapped as sex slaves or laboring throughout the world in factories as debt slaves, the life of the ancient slave was not easy. Slavery by definition is the deprivation of personal freedom of decision and action by the use of force or other measures for the supposed good of the enslaving agent or person. Thus, any form of slavery, ancient or modern, seeks the good of one person at the expense of another. As those held against their will to serve others, ancient slaves were exposed to the possibility of abuse, and many were regularly molested and neglected.

Both the Old Testament and New Testament assume the institution of slavery, a reality used pre-Civil War to argue for the moral authority to possess slaves. However, this picture is not as clear as as one might imagine. One can trace a trajectory across time and the pages of Scripture in which each era's assumptions about slaves and slavery are challenged and stretched by God and his people. In the Old Testament, the Law of Moses put rules into place which severely limited the existence of debt slavery among the Hebrews (Leviticus 25.39-55), placed restraint upon the unbridled abuse of slaves by their owners (Exodus 21.1-11, 20-21, 26-27), and pushed for compassion for slaves by calling the Israelites to remember their own experience as slaves (Deuteronomy 15.12-18). While not banning slavery, these laws pushed well beyond the accepted limits of institutional slavery in the ancient world, pushing for the recognition of slaves as persons worthy of compassion and fair treatment rather than being viewed as animals or tools. In the New Testament, Jesus regularly used slaves as characters in his parables thereby elevating their standing as individuals cared for and noticed by God. Paul's instructions to Christian households

pushed slaveholders to treat their slaves with compassion and fairness, and his allusions to the implications of freedom through the gospel can be interpreted as pushing for the equal standing and full emancipation of all slaves (Philemon 16; Colossians 3.11).

Many have argued, prior to our modern era, that while the Scriptures do stretch culture's understanding of slavery, they do not outright forbid it. Literally speaking, this is true. However, the progressive stretching and calling of the Scriptures cannot be missed. So, why did the authors of Scripture not continue to follow this trajectory and call for the ban of slavery? This is something of a thorny ethical question. The most likely answer is probably that any call to forbid slavery in the ancient world would have been ignored. Slavery was such an accepted institution that the ears of ancient people would not have received a message of emancipation. However, they could be stretched. Therefore, each successive generation of God's people called upon culture to stretch, creating a trajectory pointing to full emancipation. Therefore, the Scriptures provide a path for successive generations of God's people to follow until full freedom in Christ is found, even for the slave. This method of interpretation is used by biblical ethicists to address modern ethical dilemmas for which we find limited guidance in Scripture such as the standing of women, the personhood of the unborn, and the acceptability of euthanasia. Such an interpretive method is fraught with disagreement, but people of faith who prayerfully and diligently wrestle with these issues for the sake of God's Kingdom often come to like-mindedness and a single call to action, such as in the case of slavery.

## THE TEXT

### **PHILEMON: *SPEAKING THE LANGUAGE OF THE HEART***

The epistle (letter) of Philemon was written by Paul to Philemon, most likely the leader of the church in Colossae (Colossians 4.7-9). The setting of the letter involves a slave owned by Philemon named Onesimus who has run away and probably stolen money in the process (Philemon 11, 18). Somehow Onesimus found his way to Paul who was imprisoned in Ephesus and through Paul come to faith (Philemon 11). With Onesimus being found and now coming to faith, Paul finds himself caught between two men, brothers in Christ,

who are estranged. As an apostle and minister of the gospel who proclaims reconciliation through Christ (Colossians 1.18-20; 2 Corinthians 5.17-21), Paul sets about the process of reconciling Onesimus with Philemon. We do not know enough about the slave laws of Asia Minor to speak to Onesimus' legal situation or Philemon's ability to punish this slave. However, at a minimum Philemon has a right to punish Onesimus by seeking restitution. Paul, however, wishes to look beyond restitution to the outworkings of the gospel, forgiveness and reconciliation (Philemon 16-20). He wants Philemon to receive Onesimus back and even to grant him his freedom (Philemon 16), not because Paul demands it but because this would be the growth of God's Kingdom in the life of Philemon (Philemon 6). What is important to notice in this letter is the means by which Paul goes about reconciling Philemon with Onesimus. Rather than claiming his role and authority as an apostle, Paul approaches Philemon as an equal, begging gently for the restoration of Onesimus.

Paul's gentle approach begins with the opening of his letter in which Paul calls himself a prisoner. This is the only time Paul uses such an opening and it is one which heralds his powerlessness. This is highly unlike Paul. In nine of Paul's thirteen letters, he begins by claiming his apostleship (Romans 1.1; 1 Corinthians 1.1; 2 Corinthians 1.1; Galatians 1.1; Ephesians 1.1; Colossians 1.1; 1 Timothy 1.1; 2 Timothy, 1.1; Titus 1.1). Only in three other letters does Paul not claim his apostleship and in these situations it appears that his standing and authority were not in question (Philippians 1.1; 1 Thessalonians 1.1; 2 Thessalonians 1.1). From the beginning, we see that Paul is writing no ordinary letter. This is a very personal letter.

This letter is addressed to Philemon, the presumed leader of the Colossian Church (Colossians 4.7-9), a man with whom Paul claims deep fellowship/friendship (Philemon 6). Paul notes that he wants his friendship/fellowship with Philemon to lead to Philemon's experiential knowledge of the good things which come from Christ. Simply put, Paul wants his friend to experience a growth of God's Kingdom in his life. This growth will come from how he responds to his runaway slave Onesimus. While Paul explains he has the authority as an apostle to order Philemon to obey, he refuses to do so (Philemon 8). The Kingdom cannot come through compliance. Rather, the Kingdom comes

when Paul speaks gently to Philemon as an old man and prisoner (Philemon 9). Onesimus is dear to Paul who would like to keep him to assist him in prison. Ancient tradition is that Onesimus collected the letters of Paul which could mean he was trained as a scribe and thus useful in Paul's letter writing, but there is no solid proof of this. What is clear is that Paul refuses to act apart from the consent of Philemon, refusing to exert any force whatsoever on Philemon (Philemon 14). He longs for Philemon to recognize that Onesimus is no longer a slave but a brother who is to be treated with concern and received like Paul would be received should he be released from prison, with rejoicing (Philemon 14-17). While subtle, it is hard to miss what Paul is saying. He wants Philemon to receive Onesimus as a freed man! This is the work of the gospel, the growth of the Kingdom in Philemon, to recognize and act upon the realities of the gospel in terms of both reconciliation and freedom (Colossians 1.18-20; 3.11).

Paul accepts any debt Onesimus might owe, but teases Philemon pointing out that Philemon owes Paul an even greater debt. It is hard not to smile at Paul's teasing of his friend. Finally, he begs Philemon to act as he always does, by refreshing hearts, this time Paul's heart (Philemon 7, 21), noting that he is confident Philemon will receive and act upon this gentle request. It appears that Philemon does just this, because it is Onesimus that is seen bearing Paul's letter to the Colossian Church, a letter which acknowledges that in Christ, slaves and free men are of equal standing (Colossians 3.11; 4.9).

### **REAL LIFE WITH BLAKE:**

How do we deal with people who refuse and reject us? If we want the Kingdom of God to grow, we respond to them gently. This sounds great in theory, but often I object to this way of life because it seems impractical in real life. It feels impractical because I cannot imagine how gentle people get what they need out of people. People are generally reticent to give me what I want from them, things like acceptance, self-worth, and affection. It seems these have to be coaxed, at best, out of people. At worst, they must be demanded. I am coming to learn that these things are necessary in life, but they are not things which come from people. These things can only come from God. The things I want—I should want—from people are linked to a growth of God's Kingdom in their lives. But how do you get

God's Kingdom to grow in the life of another person, particularly when they are not really disposed to desire that growth? I am learning that the only way this can happen is if I speak the language of gentleness. The Kingdom cannot be forced. The Kingdom can only come when an invitation is extended and received, and invitations are never forceful. They are gentle. When I free people from the unrealistic expectation of giving me things they could never give me, I am free to seek their well-being, to gently extend an invitation to receive the Kingdom.

### **REAL LIFE WITH YOU:**

How do we deal with people who resist or reject us? We are gentle. This is the way of Christ, but it often not our way. We feel that the only way to make our way through this world is by powering up, particularly when it comes to getting what we want from people, and we want so much from them. When it comes to our expectations of those who surround us, the bar is pretty high. We want our love tank filled. We want our acceptance meter pointing to high. We want our feeling of self-worth to be solid. The trouble is that people are not all that willing to give us these things, all the time, if ever. So, we make them. The problem is not with people. It is with us. People were never meant to provide these things for us. These things can only come from God. When we seek these things from God, we find them and are thereby freed to seek something better for people rather than from them. What could be better than the Kingdom? But, how do we seek the Kingdom for people? We do it gently. The Kingdom cannot come with force. It only comes through the acceptance of a gentle invitation. This week, consider your relationships and what you are seeking from them. Are you seeking things from people which only God can provide? What might it look like to be free to seek the Kingdom for people by turning to God for your needs? What might it look like to extend a gentle, constant invitation to the Kingdom? Consider practicing this with those who make up your Christian community, allowing the Holy Spirit space to make this a way of being with all people in you.



SENIOR  
PASTOR  
**BLAKE**  
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