

WORD PLAY

Scripture Reading: Read Philemon 1

You either love them or hate them. I'm talking about puns and plays on words. Most of the ones we hear usually leave us groaning rather than grinning. You know the kind. For example, "You need to leave." "No, I don't. You're just barking up the wrong tree." "I am not. We just haven't been able to get to the root of the problem." "No, it just stems from the fact you don't understand where I'm coming from." "Well, that's because you want to branch off into areas where I don't want to go." Ouch! We have a couple of guys in our church that pun continually. Every now and then they come up with a good one that stops you in your tracks and you go, "Wow, that one made me think."

On occasion, there were some biblical writers that used word plays in their writings. The prophet, Micah, for example, makes use of them extensively in the 1st chapter of his book although they're hard to see in our English translations. If we were to draw attention to just a few of the word plays as Micah intended, we would find him saying, "Tell it not in Tell-Town." "Weep not in Weep-Town." "In the House of Dust, roll in the dust."

Paul is another author who utilized word plays in his writings. One such usage is in the book of Philemon. The backdrop of the book is that a slave by the name of Onesimus stole from his master, Philemon, and then ran away from him. Such a crime was punishable by death. Onesimus happened to run across Paul while he was in Rome under house arrest. Paul led him to the Lord and he served Paul well. Although he wanted to keep Onesimus with him, Paul felt obligated to return him to his master. The letter to Philemon was written by Paul to intercede on behalf of Onesimus and to seek Philemon's forgiveness and restoration of his runaway slave. It's a beautiful appeal from the aged apostle to a brother in the Lord, based not in a demand but in a plea. The word play Paul uses shows up in verse 11: "*Formerly he was useless to you, but now he has become useful both to you and to me.*"

Onesimus' name meant "useful." Before he came to Christ, however, he was anything but useful to Philemon. He was useless. After salvation, though, Onesimus lived up to his name. He became useful to Paul and Paul hoped would be useful to Philemon as well. So, how successful was the appeal? According to Ignatius, a late 1st century pastor of Antioch, very successful. He mentions a man by the name of Onesimus who became the pastor of the church in Ephesus. It looks like a useless slave not only became a useful brother. He also became a useful pastor and servant of the King.

Action Step & Prayer Focus:

Is there an Onesimus in your life who treated you dirty and ran off? Be open to the possibility that a useless enemy can become a useful brother when Christ is in the picture. Pray for the salvation of your Onesimus and for a healthy and genuine restoration of relationship. On the other hand, if you're the Onesimus, useless doesn't have to be your destiny. Usefulness can. Repent and pray for God's transformation.

Take-a-way: *God recycles useless slaves into useful servants for his kingdom.*