

Intro - Little and Large: In preparing this morning's message I've found myself thinking a lot about little and large. Now I hate to disappoint you if you're a fan, but I don't mean the comedy duo Syd Little and Eddie Large! Those weren't even their real names anyway, they were just stage names, but Mead and McGinnis doesn't have quite the same memorable ring or comedic value. No, I simply mean *big* things and *little* things.

Our culture tends to be obsessed with big things, and generally thinks that bigger is better. People want a bigger car, a bigger house, a bigger pay cheque... of course, getting the third one makes getting the first two easier!

When the Empire State Building opened in 1931 it was the tallest building in the world. I can tell you, thanks to the wonders of *Wikipedia*, that it stands 1,454ft (443.2m) high. I think that officially makes it a big thing! But that raises a problem straight away. I don't know about you, but those numbers don't really mean a lot to me. Apparently it has 102 storeys. Well, I guess that makes it about fifty times the height of my house. I can just about visualise that...

But people wanted to build bigger, taller buildings, so it didn't stay the tallest building in the world. The current holder of that title is the Burj Khalifa in Dubai. It is 2,722ft (829.8m) high, almost twice the height of the Empire State Building (thank you again, *Wikipedia!*), and I really struggle to picture that. It helps me to know that's just over half a mile. I can watch the mileometer in my car and see how far half a mile is, though even then it's hard to imagine a building that tall.

Though we human beings like to think we're pretty smart we're actually quite limited in our outlook and perception, and it's hard for us to grasp big things and numbers. Here's another, rather sobering, example. Latest estimates put the death toll from the Covid-19 pandemic at over 3¼ million. Now of course we know that's a *lot* of people. It's a *big* number, and we're saddened by it, perhaps shocked or even horrified. But can we really grasp it? I don't think so. But if your Uncle Jimmy or your Aunt Mary is one of those 3¼ million, you *can* grasp that.

A really big number: Here's another big number for you. In fact I guess you could say it's a *really big* number. The current population of the world is estimated at over 7.8 billion people (There's a website, <https://www.worldometers.info/world-population/>, where you can see the number rising in real time). That's a staggering number, and I can't begin to comprehend it. But, as the AA adverts used to say, I know a man who can!

Possibly the best-known verse in the bible, *John 3:16*, says, "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." Right there in that one verse we've got a really good example of the contrast between a little number and a large one. We've got the *world*, 7.8 billion people right now, without even trying to count those who have already died or are yet to be born, and we've got Jesus, God's *one and only* Son.

I can't comprehend 7.8 billion people, but God can, and he knows every little detail of the lives of every one of them, and he loves every one of them. There's a song, sung by Whitney Houston among others, that speaks of *The Greatest Love of All*, but this truly is the greatest love of all. To borrow from Douglas Adams' description of space in his *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, God's love is "big. Really big. You just won't believe how vastly, hugely, mindbogglingly big it is." If you feel like saying "Wow" or even "Hallelujah!" at this point, go right ahead!

We all know what it's like to love someone and, to varying degrees and in different ways, I'm sure we all love at least a few people... parents, children, husbands, wives, family, friends. Think of the one person in your life that you love more than any other, that you would do anything in your power and give anything you own to protect, and to save if they were in trouble. Then try to imagine loving 7.8 billion people that much. God doesn't just imagine it, he *does* it!

Little things mean a lot: Earlier I tried to make sense of some big things by relating them to little ones, and maybe doing that again now will help us to understand just how big God's love is. Another song comes to mind, this time from Kitty Kallen, that says, *Little Things Mean a Lot*.

It's been suggested that to begin to understand how big, and yet at the same time how small, or personal, God's love is it can help to put our own name into *John 3:16*, so it might say, "For God so loved *Karen Carratt* (or *Wilma Hanlon*, or *George Carratt* or... you get the idea) that he gave his one and only Son..."

The story of Onesimus, a runaway slave that Paul writes to his owner, Philemon, about, is a perfect illustration in miniature of the big picture of *John 3:16*. Onesimus is, if you like, a little thing that means a lot to Paul, and to God...

Onesimus, a sinner: Here we meet a man who could represent any of us, Onesimus. He is a slave belonging to Philemon, but has apparently stolen from his master *18* and run away from him, and is now in prison with Paul. Under Roman law a master held absolute power over his slaves, even to the point of life and death. Pliny writes of one slave killed by his master for dropping and breaking a crystal goblet.

The very best Onesimus could normally expect, if Philemon was lenient, was to be branded on the forehead with a hot iron with the letter "F" for *fugitivus*, or runaway, so he would carry the evidence of his crime for the rest of his life. It was more likely he would be put to death for his crime.

His situation was not good. By law he deserved punishment, even death. But in that respect he was no different to any of us. Like him we are guilty of crimes against our master, though where his master was Philemon ours is God. Our crimes are called sins, and we too deserve punishment, and even death, for them. Remember Paul's words in *Romans 6:23*, "the wages of sin is death".

A rescuer: But here is where everything changes. Paul urges Philemon to take Onesimus back "no longer as a slave, but... as a dear brother" *16*, even going so far as to say, "If he has done you any wrong or owes you anything, charge it to me" *17*. Does that sound familiar at all? Martin Luther wrote of these verses, "Even as Christ did for us with God the Father, thus Paul also does for Onesimus with Philemon." What we have here is a perfect little picture of *salvation* or redemption.

Paul knew all the theology, he even *wrote* most of it. But what he shows here is that it was not just an academic exercise to him but something to be *lived*. How often do we fall into the trap of reading the Bible but not living by it? I could go to the library and read every medical textbook I could get my hands on, but it wouldn't make me a qualified brain surgeon! In the same way, reading the Bible doesn't by itself make us Christians unless we act in accordance with what we read.

There are three elements here:

Forgiveness of sins: Onesimus' wrongdoings were to be forgiven and not held against him.

Paying of debts: Paul offers to pay any debt incurred by Onesimus. Think of Jesus taking our punishment on himself. *Isaiah 53:5* says

"But he was pierced for our transgressions,
he was crushed for our iniquities;
the punishment that brought us peace was upon him,
and by his wounds we are healed."

Intercession: Just as Jesus intercedes with His Father on our behalf, so Paul interceded with Philemon on Onesimus' behalf.

A life-changing experience: Onesimus' life was changed by his encounter with Christ. Meeting Paul in prison, he had also met Christ, and he was now a new man. Paul's plea to Philemon for clemency was the practical outworking of the salvation that Christ had already brought to Onesimus.

In *10-11* we see a wonderful pun that shows how completely Onesimus had changed. His name literally means "useful", but until now he had been anything but useful (stealing from your master and running away hardly qualifies as useful!): now Paul says, in effect, Onesimus is ready to live up to his name. What has brought about this transformation? It can only be Christ! Again, Paul knows the theology, and expresses it in *2 Corinthians 5:17*: "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!" Onesimus is a living example of the new creation, changed from a disobedient slave to a willing and eager helper.

Practise what you preach: One of our favourite sayings (as long as we're saying it to someone else rather than having it said to us!) is "practise what you preach." Here Paul does exactly that. It's in his actions towards Onesimus and his urging Philemon to forgive him that we see his Christian principles in action. Paul proved his faith was more than just words.

We can draw certain principles from this story that can be applied to other situations:

God's grace supersedes human law. *Ephesians 2:8* tells us, "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith." Paul knew that by human law Philemon was entitled to have Onesimus executed, yet reminded him of a *higher* law. In the same way, by law we deserve punishment for our sins, but by God's grace we are spared.

Exercise Christian forgiveness and tolerance. Paul's appeal to Philemon was not based on any earthly law or principle but upon Christian standards. If Philemon was being asked to forgive what Onesimus had done, perhaps we should not be too quick to condemn when someone wrongs us - think of Jesus' parable in *Matthew 18* of the unforgiving servant who was forgiven a huge debt then imprisoned for failing to forgive a small one.

All our actions should be rooted and grounded in love. Unlike most of his letters Paul does not refer to himself at the beginning of this one as an apostle, and he does not base his appeal to Philemon on that authority. Instead he says, "Therefore, although in Christ I could be bold and order you to do what you ought to do, yet I appeal to you on the basis of love" *8-9*. Onesimus had already been saved once by Christ's love and Paul was appealing to Philemon to match that. Perhaps there's a challenge in that for us...

Conclusion: The story of Onesimus may seem to be no more than a brief note about one apparently insignificant runaway slave (Some commentators believe that a later Bishop of Ephesus named Onesimus was the same man. As nice as it would be to believe so, it is highly speculative.), but it does give us a wonderful picture of salvation... of a really big thing, God's love for the *world*, made little, his love for *one man*.

What God did through Paul for Onesimus he does for us too. *We* are the little things that mean a lot to him. Let's not forget it, and let's remember to thank Him for his forgiveness, his love and his life-changing grace.