

ARE YOU SMARTER THAN A 5TH GRADER?

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Jesus said, “*Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple.*” (Luke 14:26)

Well, the summer went by in the blink of an eye and here we are on “Welcome Back Sunday.” With September upon us, one of the fun things I will resume is teaching 5th Grade Bible over at Grace Church School. I have already survived the first class. Pray for me, if you will, on Wednesdays at 9:15 am. My assignment is to introduce 22 ten and eleven-year olds to the New Testament. Every semester I greet the new students with a survey that I’ve devised and entitled, *How Much Do You Know about the New Testament?* Through a series of open-ended, multiple choice, and fill-in-the-blank questions I try to gauge whether or not the children know anything at all about Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, to say nothing of the Epistles.

How about you? Do you know anything at all about the New Testament? Are you smarter than a 5th grader? Let’s find out. Here are a few survey questions that in the quiet of your pew you can answer for yourself. Ready? *Who is the main character of the New Testament?* The correct answer, of course, is Jesus, although Moses usually scores quite a few guesses. Next: *What is the most important event of the New Testament?* No, it’s not the birth of Jesus. It’s the resurrection of Jesus. Without Easter no one would have bothered to write anything about the birth, the death, or the teachings of Jesus.

Finally, this multiple choice question. *Three of the names listed below are never mentioned in the New Testament. Circle the three.* Pay attention, now: Paul the Apostle, Caesar Augustus, Gluteus Maximus, Pontius Pilate, Samson the Sadducee, Jesus of Nazareth, Herod the King, Prince Amukamara, Judas Iscariot. Do you think you know the three? The correct answers are: Gluteus Maximus, which is not the name of a person, but the name of a muscle high up in the back on your leg; Samson the Sadducee Strangler is a character from Monty Python; and Prince Amukamara currently plays in the NFL as a starting cornerback on the Chicago Bears.

The reason I’m thinking about 5th Grade Bible today has nothing to do with the beginning of the new school year. Instead, it’s today’s Epistle that we heard a moment ago. Later on in the semester the 5th graders and I will spend a whole class on the Letter of Paul to Philemon. Why? For one thing, it’s really short. What you see printed in your bulletin is the entire thing. They can master a whole book of the Bible without much trouble. Also, a great story lies behind it. So let’s begin with the recipients of the letter: Philemon, Apphia, and Archippus. Who were they? Philemon and his wife Apphia were well-to-do Christians who owned a large household somewhere in present-day Turkey, most likely Colossae or Laodicea. Archippus was probably their son. Philemon and Apphia opened their home to be the meeting place for the local church. As such, the house would have been bustling with family members, friends, followers of the new Christian movement, and slaves. You heard that right: slaves. In the days of the Roman Empire, slavery was an entrenched reality of the culture. It wasn’t racially based as we have known it in this country. People were sold into Roman slavery for other reasons: as spoils of war, to pay off debt, as punishment for a crime. In fact, one out of five people in the Roman Empire was a slave. In the city of Rome itself it was one out of every three.

Onesimus was a slave in the household of Philemon and Apphia. One day he decided he’d had enough. When he saw his opportunity he robbed Philemon of a considerable sum and fled to

Rome, probably hoping to melt into the vast population of the metropolis. While he was in Rome Onesimus fell in with another prominent Christian. Guess who: Paul the Apostle. Paul was under house arrest, awaiting trial for disturbing the public with his preaching of the gospel. In any case, Paul had time on his hands, so he spent long hours with Onesimus, introducing the runaway slave to life in Christ. Eventually Onesimus was baptized. Paul then counseled him that as a new Christian the right thing to do would be to seek reconciliation with Philemon and Apphia. How? It would involve returning to their home and placing himself at their mercy. Why? Many reasons, not the least of which was life as a fugitive slave under Roman law would be nasty, brutish, and short.

What should Onesimus do? If he chose to return he would do so at considerable risk. But he would not arrive empty-handed. As it happened, Paul personally knew Philemon and his family, and likely had baptized them. So Paul wrote a letter to the whole household for Onesimus to take with him. In the letter he asked them all to receive Onesimus back, not as a slave but as a beloved brother in Jesus. Of course, Onesimus could have taken the letter and tossed it, concluding that life on the run was still the better risk. But if he did make the hard choice to return to Philemon and Apphia, what should they do? Should they receive Onesimus as a brother in Christ, as Paul appealed? Or should they press him back into his old role as a household slave? Or should they turn him over to the local Roman authorities? What should they do? What should Onesimus do? These are the questions I'll put to the 5th graders later this semester. If this year is anything like previous years, do you know what they'll say at the end of the class? It's the same every time around. No way should Onesimus return to his former household. He should run in the opposite direction and not look back. And no way should Philemon and Apphia welcome back the runaway slave who stole from them. They should have him arrested the minute he shows up at the door.

Jesus said, "*Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.*" In today's reading from the Gospel of Luke we go from out of the frying pan and into the fire. Jesus turns up the heat on what it means to be a Christian so that it's even hotter than what we find it to be in Philemon. Being a disciple will involve making hard, counter-cultural choices that might even set you against your family. Being a Christian might even conflict with everyone's natural instinct for self-preservation. We don't like it. I don't like it. We like to imagine that the New Testament is a gentle melody ambling along to the strains of peace, love, and harmony. Then these harsh, unwelcome words of Jesus come crashing in and ruins the whole song.

Today's reading from Luke reminds me of a recent hit single by the popular band, Maroon 5. The name of the song is *Girls Like You*, and if you've heard it, you'll agree that it's a really catchy, even mesmerizing tune. These past two summers on vacation, whenever *Girls Like You* came on over the car radio, I was always happy to hear it. But the song has a problem – dare I say, a flaw – that occurs about two-thirds of the way into it. Suddenly, the rapper Cardi B. comes crashing into the otherwise pleasant melody with a brash, discordant, thirty-second interlude that to many ears – mine included – ruins the song. I mean no disrespect to the lovely Cardi B., but the interlude doesn't fit. In fact, this summer I was pleased to hear a rogue version of the song in which someone, through the wonders of digital technology, seamlessly edited out the interlude. It was much better, I thought. It was nice and peaceful from beginning to end. Guys like me should steer clear of girls like Cardi B.

Likewise, the harsh words of Jesus and the discordant demands of discipleship in the New Testament. Are you smarter than a 5th grader? Perhaps their wisdom is sound. A person like you should steer clear of a preacher like that. Run in opposite direction as fast as you can. Or at least smooth out these jagged edges of the New Testament. Better yet, edit them away entirely. The whole thing would be much more pleasing to our ears if we did. Who would miss them? What

would we lose? Perhaps we would lose everything. Perhaps it's in the uncomfortable places of a song or a document where the true meaning is to be found.

Let me ask you this: what do you think actually happened with Onesimus and Philemon and Apphia? What did Onesimus do? My guess is that he was sorely tempted to keep running – to risk life as a fugitive for however much time he could elude the authorities. Instead, it's clear that he decided that the better path to freedom was to carry his cross and be a disciple of Jesus. He returned to Philemon and Apphia and presented them with himself and the letter. What then did Philemon and Apphia do? It's clear that they too decided that life in Christ was of surpassing worth, far better than any prize their natural inclinations might award them. They did indeed welcome back Onesimus, not as a slave, but as a brother in Christ. But how can we be sure? Who's to say what really happened? What the 5th graders always want to know is what you, too, may be wondering.

Do we have any evidence that Onesimus returned and found a welcome? We do. The evidence is as plain as the bulletins in your hands or the Bible in your pews. We have the letter. The letter that Paul wrote survived to be copied countless times and eventually bound up in the New Testament as an essential document of the Christian faith. Think about it. Had Onesimus chosen life on the run he would have tossed the letter and that would have been the end of it. Had Philemon and Apphia not followed Paul's appeal, they too would have tossed the letter and it would have been gone. But it's not gone, and that isn't the end of it. Here's the letter, nearly twenty centuries later, before our eyes and on our ears today. Another piece of evidence that survives outside the New Testament is a letter written by Ignatius of Antioch, a 1st century bishop and theologian. Ignatius was addressing the church at Ephesus, not far from the home of Philemon and Apphia. In the letter he praises their bishop as a man of "inexpressible love" whom they should strive to emulate. The name of the Bishop of Ephesus? Onesimus.¹

So now you, too, have mastered a whole book of the Bible. That's the great story behind Philemon, Apphia, and Onesimus, all of whom are indeed mentioned in the New Testament. By contrast, Ignatius of Antioch, despite being an early bishop and martyr is not to be found in the pages of Scripture. Likewise, you will search the Scriptures in vain for the semi-Biblically sounding name of Prince Amukamara. But you can read about him in the sports pages as the NFL begins a new season this weekend. And he's quite candid in talking about other aspects of his life as well. As it turns out, Prince Amukamara is a Christian, seriously committed to striving after Jesus, and making the hard choices of discipleship. In one interview he said, "*Being a Christian in the NFL is no different than being a Christian in other professions. It can be tough because some of your peers live very different lives and question why you do the things you do.*" Seven years ago he was a rookie on the New York Giants team that won the Super Bowl. Concerning the experience that many would say is the pinnacle of athletic achievement, Amukamara said it was indeed great, "*but the feeling ... went away pretty quickly. I don't think about it much unless people remind me. I know that I'm a Christian every day of my life. Being a part of the Body of Christ is eternal. That's forever ... that's what I think about the most.*"²

Jesus said, "*Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.*" The words are hard to hear, but the way of the cross proves to be the way of life.

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¹ William Barclay, [The Letters to Timothy, Titus, and Philemon](#), The Westminster Press, 1975, p. 275.

² From an interview with Chad Bonham, Beliefnet.com, December 2012.