This may come as no surprise to you. Or maybe it will. But, when I was kid, I could be a little mouthy. At least, that’s what I was told. Of course (!), I probably was not all that bad. But I had (and still have) a need to understand the rationale behind decisions. Which is all to say that I would, a bit too often, respond to a directive from my mother with the simple question, “Why?”

Bad idea.

My dear mother loved her only son. Still does, my mouthiness (then and now) notwithstanding. But this she could not accept! And in response to my impertinent question she would say (perhaps echoing her own parents), with syllables laced with fire and ice, “Because I’m your mother, that’s why!”

What she did was pull rank on me. Which, of course, was entirely appropriate! She had the right, and I am sure she was right! Because even though the relationship between parent and child may be, should be, one of tenderness and fair-dealing, even so it is also one in which the parent has authority over the child. And sometimes, for the good of the child and for the health of the relationship, that authority must be restated. Ideally, pulling rank would be rare, but at times it may be necessary.

We all have relationships that are structured according to authority, relationships in which one person has authority over another. Besides children and parents, there are

workers and bosses,  
students and teachers,  
soldiers and officers,  
players and coaches,  
musicians and conductors —

all these relationships that are persistently if quietly about status, authority, rank, and power. We all know what these are about, for we have experienced them from the moment we were born, living in an ever-evolving network of relationships comprising different authority structures. Sometimes we’re the lower, other times the higher; we’ve been the one commanded, and we’ve been the commander. And we’ve all known what it’s like when someone pulls rank.

It can be uncomfortable, for both. Sure, some bosses like to be bossy, and pull rank in great part because it makes them feel great. And some subordinates need to be told, in no uncertain terms, who’s the boss, because otherwise they just don’t get it. But it seems that most of us would prefer if we never have to get there, if the authority relationship would work smoothly on its own without such forcible intervention as pulling rank.
Paul was sending Onesimus back to Philemon. It was a risky move, especially for Onesimus, but of course, what alternative was there, at that time, in that culture? Paul could no longer keep him, for the entire weight of Roman law was against him, and besides, Paul was a prisoner. For Onesimus to stay on the run would put him in great danger, subject to arrest at any moment, subject to hunger and exposure, subject to theft or abuse or even death. Yet, in going back to his master, as a runaway slave, Onesimus might be beaten, or given dangerous tasks that would shorten his life, or starved, or even killed. And there was nothing anyone could do about it.

Because in that day, no one would question a slave owner’s right to treat a slave any way he wanted. It was expected that a wealthy man who owned slaves could do anything, and I mean anything, he wanted to with those slaves.

For a runaway who was returned, well, the situation was even worse. Perhaps the master would want to make an example of that slave, to keep the other slaves in line. Now you see him, now you don’t! “Hey all, this is what happens when you run away.”

All of that was in the realm of the normal and expected, the realm of the cultural and even legal. And yet here was Paul, about to send Onesimus back to Philemon, back to slavery, back to...what?

But Paul knew Philemon. He knew of Philemon’s faith in Jesus Christ. He knew of his love for the church. He knew of all he had done to advance the spread of the gospel. So he was hopeful that he could send Onesimus back to Philemon and no harm would come to Onesimus.

For this is what Paul so desired: that Philemon would not only receive Onesimus, not only that he would restore Onesimus to his former position without punishment, not only that he would forgive Onesimus, but even more that he would welcome Onesimus not merely as a returning slave but as a brother in Christ. Because that’s what Onesimus now was: a brother in Christ, a believer in the Lord Jesus, just as was Philemon. That was the unexpected yet joyful result of Onesimus’ having run away, that he became a Christian:

“Perhaps this is the reason he was separated from you for a while,” says Paul, “so that you might have him back forever, no longer as a slave but more than a slave, a beloved brother — especially to me but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord.”

Now, all through you can sense Paul struggling. Because he knows that, really, the relationship between him and Philemon was not that of equals. This was one of those authority relationships. Sure, it wasn’t of master and slave. But Paul was an apostle. Paul was the founder of churches. Paul was the writer of letters, the traveling missionary, the faithful witness imprisoned for his faith. No one in the Church would question that Paul had the right to pull rank on Philemon.

And yet, this was precisely Paul’s struggle. For he knew he could pull rank, and even alludes to his right to do so: “I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do your duty....” But he doesn’t want to do that. He doesn’t want to pull rank. No, he’d rather that Philemon do what Paul wants by his own free will. “I would rather appeal to you on the basis of love,” he says.

Given what Paul is asking, this makes a lot of sense. Because Paul wants Philemon to go against the cultural and legal expectations of the day, by treating Onesimus as a brother, as an equal in Christ and thus in his daily living: “So if you consider me your partner,” Paul says, “welcome him as you would welcome me.” That’s asking a lot, because Paul and Onesimus are not equals, in the eyes of society. One is a citizen, the other is a slave. Nor are they equals in the eyes of many Christians. One is an apostle, the other is a brand new believer. For Philemon to welcome Onesimus as he would welcome Paul would place Philemon and Paul and Onesimus all
on the same level. Which is exactly Paul’s point. In Christ, Paul suggests here, all the faithful are equals, brothers and sisters. In Christ, the earthly hierarchies are transcended. Living in Christ leads naturally to a flattening of the hierarchies, leads to a joyful desire to imbue all relationships — including those based on authority and rank — with grace and love.

Paul wants Philemon to ignore his culturally approved rights. He wants Philemon to refrain from pulling rank on Onesimus. So then, how could Paul pull rank on Philemon? How could Paul order Philemon in this matter? That would completely undercut what Paul was saying, making him a hypocrite. No, there would be no pulling rank here, not with what Paul wants of Philemon.

So, Paul asks. He urges. He emphasizes love. He exalts not himself but Jesus. He seeks to highlight what being a disciple of Jesus Christ should lead Philemon to do when Onesimus returns. And in all that, he has hope in Philemon’s affirmative response, trusting that Philemon will put aside his rights, put aside expectation, transcend somewhat his culture, just as Paul himself has done, and welcome Onesimus as a brother in the Lord.

What does all this mean for us today? Well, I believe it’s about perspective, and by that I mean simply how we see life in the light of the love of Jesus Christ. The result of this perspective is that we who are in Christ are challenged and freed to see all relationships of hierarchy and status as temporary, especially those that exist between believers.

For those in Christ, what is most real is not the differences of status, of rank, of power. For those in Christ, fundamentally and at the most real we are equal: brothers and sisters because of our adoption by God in Christ.

And that is how we are supposed to see things, so that we focus on and take as important:

- the blessing of our relationship in Christ,
- the joy of our shared salvation,
- the thrill of our shared mission,

and overlook as ultimately far less important all those differences that often get built into the structuring of authority and by which people tend to place themselves higher or lower than others:

- age and experience,
- sex and marital status,
- race and ethnicity,
- class and wealth,
- mental acuity and physical dexterity,
- possessions and accomplishments.

All of these are viewed from a Christ perspective, with an eye toward bringing heaven down here, a perspective that celebrates a salvation accomplished not by one’s own status and power but solely by the work of God in Jesus Christ.

This perspective is no mental trick, nor is it only about something that is to happen in the hereafter when God wraps up this earthly story and inaugurates a new age. No, this perspective is to have an impact on how we treat each other in the here and now.
It’s not that all human interactions involving authority and power are immediately transformed so that no one is boss or subordinate, leader or follower, teacher or student, coach or teammate, commander or soldier. But rather these must be lived out in a way that reflects the love and mercy of Jesus, the equality that he both desires and creates, by his own self-giving he creates.

For those believers who are in positions of authority, this is both challenging and freeing. It may be challenging to ignore expectations of leadership that have infused the culture in which you work. It may be challenging to resist your temptation to compensate for your own sense of powerlessness by picking on a subordinate. But at the same time, for those who know they belong to Jesus, it is freeing not to see your self-worth in your authority over another, for that is always changing. It is freeing to be open to the potential that your subordinate can teach you something, even correct you and direct you toward the truth. It is freeing to see both yourself and your subordinate as those for whom Christ died. And it is freeing, in the light of all that, to focus for a time simply on what is simply good: for the other person, for the task at hand, for the work you are asked to do together — and not use these as pawns for self-serving ends.

And when we are the ones with less power — the subordinate, the student, the player on the team — there is likewise both challenge and freedom. It may be challenging to ignore the subtle lie often whispered throughout society that such relationships say something enduring about who we are. It may be challenging to stop resenting leaders who are less than ideal. It may be challenging to resist your temptation to compensate for your own sense of powerlessness by gossiping about the boss. And yet it is also freeing. You are freed from thinking that you are really and truly less than the one who commands you. You are freed from the fear of telling your boss the truth. You are freed to see both yourself and your boss as those for whom Christ died. And it is freeing, in the light of all that, to focus for a time simply on what is simply good: for the other person, for the task at hand, for the work you are asked to do together — and not use these as pawns for self-serving ends.

My friends, may God bless us with this in-Christ perspective, so that we may have a joyful desire to imbue all relationships — including those based on authority and rank — with grace and love, so that God may be glorified.