

Sermon - 09/04/22
Ps 139; Jer 18:1-11; Philemon; Lu 14:25-33

Today we look at the letter to Philemon, all 25 verses. It was written by Paul probably from Ephesus. Paul was imprisoned for at least two years there.

This letter was sent to one person, Philemon. Since Paul addresses him with great respect, we are sure he is a Roman or a Greek of some wealth and standing in his town of Colossae. He may even have been the bishop of a church that met in his home. Paul has written a literary gem of gentle persuasion to this brother in Christ. Paul eloquently appeals to Philemon's Christian character and faith – *not* to his political and legal rights or his standing as a prominent citizen of the Empire. The Jesus way – not the worldly way. The larger issue is the treatment of a run-away slave. The slave's name is Onesimus. Onesimus means *useful* in Greek.

The cross of Christ is here, suspended between heaven and earth. Jesus personally, physically and with divine grace bore the burden of our guilt and shame of sin. Paul doesn't mention the cross in the letter. No, but he tells Philemon, "I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective when you perceive all the good that we may do for Christ." (v 6) Paul appeals to Philemon's best and highest calling – that of a Jesus-follower.

In the 1st c AD slavery was an integral part of life. Those who could afford to keep slaves had them. Those who were captured in battle or were born into slavery or who were too poor to feed, clothe and house themselves – became slaves. There was no controversy about the institution of slavery. You might think of owning slaves as something like owning a dishwasher or a vacuum cleaner in our time. You would buy one if you could afford it. So, we who have rid ourselves of the horror of slavery by law in this country don't have the same perception of slavery. We view it as evil and wrong. Not so in the 1st c. There is illegal slave trade in our time, but that's another subject.

Not even our beloved Paul would have reason to speak against slavery – *except* that he is making an appeal to a slave-owner for a slave who is under his protection. Onesimus has heard Paul preach – and has believed the Word of God – so has become a brother in Christ to both Paul and Philemon. Paul often referred to those who were in his pastoral care as "his children." He calls Onesimus his son, meaning a son in the faith. He spoke the same way about Timothy.

This letter is addressed to Philemon and his household. Apphia is his wife. Archippus is his son. They are very probably in ministry with Philemon in the house church. Onesimus has run away from his master. Paul doesn't call it running away. He says Onesimus has "been separated" from Philemon (v 15). The slave ran to the nearest big city, Ephesus. There, he has become part of the congregation that Paul and Timothy serve.

What Onesimus has done is against the laws of the state. He has no rights at all. Paul offers to pay Philemon for anything the slave has taken, or even for damages that he might wish to claim.

So, having put the matter into the right historical light, you and I are left to judge what Philemon should do. Paul asks him to take Onesimus back as a brother in Christ – not as a piece of property. The law defined a slave as the property of the owner. Paul is asking Philemon to relinquish his rights as a citizen – as a property owner – as a participant in the culture of the time. He wants him to cut the dock lines and to follow Jesus all the way.

Finally, Paul says he is sending Onesimus back to Philemon. He asks him to receive him as though he were Paul himself, not a run-away slave. He gives Philemon freedom to choose to break the old mold – to burst from the cocoon and spread the wings of his new life in Christ – or not. We must leave it there. We do not know how this story ended. We can only judge ourselves – how would you and I act given such a choice? How would you choose – keep your rightful property or sell out to Jesus? Philemon has the power to punish or even to kill Onesimus for what he has done. He also has the power to transform the relationship between Onesimus and himself – slave-master and slave – or co-equal brothers in Christ.

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Jesus has something to say about all this. You knew He would, right? He says, “Anyone who wants to be my follower must love me far more than he does his own father, mother, wife, children, brothers, or sisters—yes, more than his own life—otherwise he cannot be my disciple.” (v 26 TLB) To love and bear the cross of Christ, even before home and family. That is hard for us. It is sacrifice of very dear things.

Jesus gives us two examples from the world of the 1st c. If you are planting a vineyard, you will want to build a watchtower in it, to protect the crop from thieves and vandals. You must calculate the cost of time and materials. You need to assess your ability to begin and then finish the work. Likewise, if you are a ruler and need to go to war, you must assess the opposing forces. Can you succeed in defending the territory? Will you simply be defeated? In the case of the tower, you will have started something you can't finish. That will be your legacy. In the case of the battle, you'd better negotiate for terms of peace, or you will be overrun by the superior force.

Jesus says, “You cannot become My disciple if you do not give up all your possessions.” You must count the cost. That does not always mean you must sell all you have and become a ragged street-preacher. It does mean every use of your time, talent and treasure must be to the glory of the Lord Jesus Christ. You owe Him everything.

We can sing and talk about our devotion to Jesus. That is a good thing, but Jesus and Paul tell us true refreshment – true fellowship in Christ – this is to ***live out*** the Gospel here and now. Jesus says plan to be strategic in our service to Him – if we desire to be His true disciples.

Today is the day: be truly reconciled to God in Christ so that you ***are*** living in opposition to worldly values. Jesus has done all the work – He has already made the way to abundant living – living in Him and for Him. The Jesus way – not the worldly way. Amen.