

The Apostle Paul: Slave or Free
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A Sermon Preached at the Larchmont Avenue Church
August 22, 2010
Text: Paul's letter to Philemon

*Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother,
To Philemon our dear friend and co-worker, to Apphia our sister, to Archippus our fellow soldier,
and to the church in your house:*

*Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.
When I remember you in my prayers, I always thank my God because I hear of your love for all
the saints and your faith toward the Lord Jesus. I pray that the sharing of your faith may become
effective when you perceive all the good that we may do for Christ. I have indeed received much
joy and encouragement from your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed
through you, my brother. For this reason, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to
do your duty, yet I would rather appeal to you on the basis of love—and I, Paul, do this as an old
man, and now also as a prisoner of Christ Jesus. I am appealing to you for my child, Onesimus,
whose father I have become during my imprisonment. Formerly he was useless to you, but now
he is indeed useful both to you and to me. I am sending him, that is, my own heart, back to you. I
wanted to keep him with me, so that he might be of service to me in your place during my
imprisonment for the gospel; but I preferred to do nothing without your consent, in order that
your good deed might be voluntary and not something forced. Perhaps this is the reason he was
separated from you for a while, 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. So if you consider me your partner, welcome him as you would welcome
me. If he has wronged you in any way, or owes you anything, charge that to my account. I, Paul,
am writing this with my own hand: I will repay it. I say nothing about your owing me even your
own self. Yes, brother, let me have this benefit from you in the Lord! Refresh my heart in Christ.
Confident of your obedience, I am writing to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say.
One thing more—prepare a guest room for me, for I am hoping through your prayers to be
restored to you.*

*Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends greetings to you, and so do Mark,
Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke, my fellow workers.
The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.*

As we have been digging deeper into the letters Paul wrote to Churches and fellow Christians in the Greco-Roman world, Paul's controversiality feels in some ways never-ending. Even those topics we might never have expected to be controversial, something such as slavery, Paul seems to make it so. Our text this morning is an entire book of the bible (though a short one) and remains perhaps the only personal letter written by Paul in our New Testament. The letter to Philemon in many ways exemplifies much of Paul's ethic, that is, Paul's understanding about how the gospel should effect our daily life, and so it does us well to spend some time with it.

Paul's letter to Philemon is the one personal letter in our New Testament that is unquestionably written by Paul himself. I won't go into detail about how scholars determine these things, but the letters to Timothy and Titus don't seem to have the marks of true Pauline writing. However, this short letter, so often passed over in our New Testament, is Pauline through and through.

In it, Paul writes to a leader in the church in Collosae named Philemon, whom he seems to know quite well. The letter is brought to Philemon in the hands of a man named Onesimus, formerly a slave belonging to the household of Philemon, a runaway. As I mentioned last week the caste system was quite elaborate and culturally supported in the Greco-Roman world which Paul writes. A runaway slave was at the very bottom of the heap. The act of Onesimus returning to his former owner's household would inevitably and necessarily result in severe punishment, even death. In other words, Paul is sending his dear Onesimus, his heart, into the lion's den.

But why? What is Paul doing?

Once again Paul leaves us hanging. We want our scriptures to stand up for what we know to be right and true. We want Paul to say that slavery is an abomination. We want him to say, outright, that Onesimus should be freed, or even to say something like, "I've met your former slave and he's staying with me." But he doesn't. Instead he says something more like: "I know you know what you're supposed to do and I expect you to do it..."

While we don't read this text very often, you might see quickly that it was read and preached quite frequently during the time of the Civil War in our country. Both sides had their opinions. The South preached that Paul allowed for slavery, pointed out that he sent Onesimus back to his owner to continue in his former life. The Northern anti-slavery preachers instead read between the lines of what Paul says and doesn't say, and suggest that Paul "implies" that he expects his friend to be set free. He all but threatens him when he tells Philemon to prepare a bed for him, I'll be there in a week. "Charge

me any debt he owes you," he says, "I expect you to do this..." But whatever we might try to argue - Paul's inference is not as clear as we would like.

Is he ever? What is the deal? Is Paul against slavery or not? Why doesn't he make things clear? Then again - Jesus didn't make too much clear either.

This past week I got into a short conversation with a beloved family member about scripture. The conversation was familiar, since I've had it many many times before with many different people, and in that way I felt somewhat on edge and exasperated. It began in reference to my sermon last week, and my tendency throughout this series to speak of what Paul says, rather than what God says through our Holy Scriptures. "Aren't these the words of God inspired by the Holy Spirit?" he asked...

The question of the divine inspiration of Scripture is a tricky one, particularly when it comes to Paul. There is much of what Paul says that seems heavily loaded with his cultural context. His assumptions: that women are in the image of man, that slavery is an institution we should accept rather than rebel against, that the purpose of marriage is to quell our enflamed passions. Paul contradicts himself often, leaving much of what he means somewhat unclear. The reality is there is much in our scriptures - even beyond Paul - that is hard to swallow. Stories sometimes called "texts of terror," stories for which we should have no tolerance, texts which contradict themselves. None of this is easy to sort out.

So as thinking, believing people, how do we read these texts? How do we live out a life of faith that accepts some but not all of our scriptures as divinely inspired? How do we determine which to follow and which to leave out? It's a good and necessary question for any faithful Christian.

The truth is, all Christians make these choices. We make choices, like I did in this conversation, about whether or not to engage or to look away. We make choices about whether or not we're going to read the whole bible or just the parts we like. We make choices about which text will be our guiding principal, the text through which all other texts are read. Will it be - "Jesus Christ is the way the truth and the life, no one can come to the father except through me (John 14:6)"? Or will it be "God is love. Whoever loves knows God.(1 John 4)"?

The point is that it is a conversation. Divine inspiration means not that the texts were inspired once a long time ago and now we've got the truth in our hands. It means that the Holy Spirit speaks in and through our texts again and again if we only read them. And so as we discover new truths about gender equality and slavery and

homosexuality we read our scriptures with new insight and new questions. They are the living word. A word that is not static but elastic, growing and revealing new truths at every turn.

As we look back at Paul's letter to Philemon, we could point out that Paul does not explicitly say that Onesimus should be freed. In fact, the truth is that if he were freed, Onesimus would likely have been worse off than he was as a slave. With no protection and possibly no way to earn power for himself in his world. Please know that I am not, in any way, suggesting that slavery in the Greco-Roman world was like modern-day slavery; I am not suggesting that any slave today is better off. But in the Greco-Roman world, freed slaves were exiled and ostracized, and their survival was often only through even more abusive and disgraceful means.

But Paul has said there is no longer slave or free. And if he truly means that, then how can he send a newly baptized Onesimus back to Philemon acting as though nothing has changed?

Everything has changed. Whereas we might fault Paul for coming up short, we miss Paul's understanding of just how far the gospel of Christ goes to change the world in which we live.

Paul does not suggest that Philemon should free his slave, instead Paul suggests that he should treat his slave as a brother. "Perhaps this is the reason he was separated from you for a while," he says, "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."

This is no small thing. Brothers in the Greek and Roman Social systems were supposed to have close bonds of trust and affection. Slaves, on the other hand, were orphans. They may have been born to slave parents, but their familial connections were unrecognized. As one commentator puts it, "A deep, broad, menacing chasm cut slaves off from legitimate children and free blood siblings. A slave was a *filius neminis*, a son of no one."¹

Paul's suggestion was outrageous. It was a joke. In Philemon's cultural context, bringing this slave into his family tree makes any sense whatsoever. And yet, Paul suggests not only that Philemon can, and should take his former slave in as a full member of his family, but that it already is so. Paul suggests that in Christ these two men are already brothers, with those close bonds of trust and affection, and merely asks Philemon to act accordingly.

When Bill Nathan appeared on the stage at Purdue University during our Triennium worship, he already had us in the palm of his hand. We had just watched a video produced by ABC News about how one of their writers, Ben Skinner, had put everything on the line to charter a plane to Haiti in the first few days after the earthquake to save Bill's life

Bill and Ben had met years before, when Ben was writing a book on modern-day slavery; Bill was one of the directors of an orphanage that took in former child slaves. During his time in Haiti Ben contracted a severe case of malaria and Bill tracked down the medicine he needed and nursed him back to health. Bill saved Ben's life.

And so, when he learned Bill had been severely injured in the earthquake, Ben chartered a plane, got himself to Haiti, and evacuated Bill to Florida for treatment. Bill would not have survived if Ben had not made such a daring move.

The story of the earthquake is only half of it. As Bill Nathan walked back and forth on the stage he told us his own story of slavery. Bill had been orphaned at the age of five. Like many orphans in Haiti, had been given to a family who at first assured the nun who knew him that they would take him in and treat him as family. They lied. A few weeks after Bill's parents died he began serving his new family as a slave. He slept on the dirt floor of a shed in back of the house. He ate only what was leftover and only alone in the dirt, never at the family table. He worked dusk until dawn, and if he resisted he was beaten severely.

After a few years the nun who had cared for him at the death of his parents rescued him and brought him to Saint Joseph's orphanage, where they continue to help former child slaves. Bill grew up there. He was educated. He was hired. Now he works at the orphanage that saved his life. He spends his life returning the favor.

Both men in the story were visibly moved by their connection. The debt of life is a hard one to put into words. The newscaster asked Ben why he went to all these lengths to save his friend. "It was a debt I owed him," he says... His pilot and friend in the rescue operation said, "When your family is in need - you show up." Bill said, "God was watching over me."

Brothers. Beloved. Free. What we see as impossible, God makes possible. Where we see no bond, God sees family.

Somehow, in Christ, these two men have been changed. Yesterday they were slave and master. But today, something new has formed. The old has gone, the new has begun. Today they are beloved family members. They share food at the same table. They share inheritance.

Paul's ethic tells us that we are to go above and beyond what is required of us for one another. We do more than the minimum. We do more than write the check; we make the meal with our own hands and sit down and eat with together. We do more than put the welcome sign out; we sweep the floor and make the bed and put on the tea. We do more than forgive; we become family. We do more, more than we imagined, more than we can spare, much more.

We don't always have the opportunity to save another's life. We don't always have the opportunity to bring another up out of slavery or poverty or hunger. But Paul's ethic is one of boundless, irrational love. A love that is from God. A love that has already been set in motion through Christ. What he shows through his letter to Philemon is that the rules have changed even if the landscape has not. We are a part of a family that is beyond our vision or understanding. And when family is in need, you show up.

¹ Ruden, Sarah Paul Among the People Pantheon Books, 2010 pg 164-165