

A Change in the Air: There's a Cost

Philemon

Farmville Baptist Church

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These past couple of weeks, my family has spent a good amount of time sitting around. We have had multiple trips to the doctor's office, the surgical center, and even the emergency room trying to help my son with his nosebleeds. We've also had a good amount of time sitting around the house, as we've tried to keep a very active 7-year-old from bouncing off the walls and causing more problems post-op. As we've sat around, I've had the chance to do one of my favorite things: read. I've been working my way through a new sea story – a true one, but one I don't know very much about. It's the story of the first ships of the United States

Navy, the six original frigates authorized by the United States in the closing years of the 18th century.

The six ships, and the brave men who sailed them, saw plenty of action. These were the ships that fought the Barbary Pirate wars, including landing Marines on “the shores of Tripoli.” These were the ships ~~that~~^{that} challenged French privateers and fought the British in the War of 1812. One of the first frigates, *USS Constitution*, remains the oldest commissioned warship in the world. The book is jam-packed with adventurous yarns, because these six Navy ships belonged to a swashbuckling era where you chased the wind and fired broadsides in an attempt to get your enemy to strike their colors.

Among the many elements of the story that are standing out to me this morning, though, is the sheer cost of what it took to build and crew these ships. I’m not talking monetary

cost – though the sums were high, they were not astronomical. I'm talking the human cost in terms of time and potential threat to life and limb. The ships took years to build, and months to bring out of mothballs whenever a new threat arose. Crews were recruited and enlisted for a period of a year or two – and in that year or two, they might spend all of it getting from here to the Mediterranean and back. Life onboard ship was not easy, with limited supplies, primitive healthcare, harsh discipline, and total isolation from any world beyond the rails and masts of your ship. And that's before you even count the danger of shot and shell, of British warships and French privateers, of Atlantic gales and capture by Barbary pirates. Sailors in the late 1700s and early 1800s could find themselves killed or maimed in action, drowned by the waves, captured and enslaved by

pirates, felled by disease, or grabbed and forced into service on a British or French ship without any recourse.

And all of this was seen as normal, acceptable, the cost of doing business – or, in this case, the cost of having a navy and, on the individual level, the potential cost of going down to the sea.

There are some things in life that carry a cost. Sometimes the cost is merely potential – it *could* cost this much. Other times, the cost is guaranteed. Athletes who wish to compete at the highest level must pay a price – years of practice and development, often incredible stresses on the body and mind. Students who wish to excel academically count a similar cost: the dedication of years of study, the development of habits and focus that enable academic success. Those who climb the corporate ladder must often sacrifice to do so, whether that sacrifice is their free time,

their family life, their principles and morals, or sometimes all of the above. Conversely, those who want healthy and happy families, healthy and happy marriages, know that those meaningful relationships don't just happen – they cost us something: our effort, our personal preferences at times, our independence. In all of these examples, we consider the things that such ventures, such goals, such relationships cost, or could cost, us, and then we weigh it out: is it worth it? Will we pay the price to achieve what we desire or accomplish what we hope for? There's an old saying – the best things in life are free – and that is utter hogwash. The best things in life are the things that cost us the most – we just have to decide if they are worth it.

That was all going through my mind this week as I came to our first Scripture passage. We've been spending a lot of time in Luke's Gospel as we've thought about the way Jesus

was changing things, leading his people into new ways of considering the world and seeing God at work within it, understanding how Jesus was inviting his followers, and us, to a new way, a different way, of life. And in our passage from Luke's Gospel, we hear him give a word of advice, maybe even of warning: if you want to follow Jesus, if you want to live into the new life he was describing, then make sure you understand the cost. Because, Jesus says, you can't be his disciple unless you're willing to pay the price.

We hear that. We've heard sermons on that before. We've sung songs about our commitment to follow Jesus, and prayed prayers where we promise to abide by his will no matter what. And those commitments – well, we mean them. We believe them. We trust God and pledge ourselves to him. And those commitments by us to Jesus form one side of our covenant with God – the other being Christ's

promises to us. They are the price we pay, so to speak, to be in relationship with God, to be part of Christ's band of disciples bringing the kingdom into being here on earth as it is heaven. We do not, and cannot, earn our salvation – but Christ does say that when we embrace his free gift, we choose to be part of his family of faith, and that has some responsibilities. It carries a cost.

And that makes perfect sense to us. We gladly take it on when we accept the saving grace of Jesus and pass through the waters of baptism. But what does it look like when the rubber meets the road, and the cost has come due? What does it look like for our commitment to Jesus to actually cost us something...especially something big?

That's what Paul is trying to find out in our second reading today, his letter to a man named Philemon.

The letter to Philemon is unique in the New Testament. It is the shortest of Paul's letters. It is also the only one of his letters written to an individual who is not directly working with him (like Timothy and Titus). Instead, it is written to a man who appears to be part of the church in Colossae, a city in the southern part of what is now Turkey. We don't know what he did, how old he was, how he became a follower of Christ – except for Paul being involved – or much else about him. We only know three pieces of biographical detail: he appears to be married to a Christian named Apphia; he owns at least one slave, and probably more; and a church meets in his home.

Each of these facts tells us a little about the situation Paul is addressing. That Philemon is married, and his wife is also a believer, suggests that this is a family affair, and this family is prominent; Philemon and his wife almost certainly

head this church, perhaps alongside Archippus. Whatever else we may know or not know about them, Philemon and Apphia are not novices in the faith. They are seasoned disciples, mature believers, at least as mature as the city of Colossae could boast at this early stage.

Setting aside the second fact for a moment, we look at the third: a church is meeting in their home. At the time, congregations of Christians did not typically have a centralized sanctuary. Rather, little groups of Christians met, usually in the home of whatever member had the best space available. They were part of “the church of” whatever city, but each house church had a degree of autonomy as well. This particular congregation would have mostly been people connected directly with Philemon and his wife: business partners, family members, neighbors, employees or slaves. These small groups of believers were radically

connected to one another; they ate together, they sang together, they did life together. And, on this occasion, they will hear a letter to one of the leaders of their church from the spiritual father or grandfather of this particular congregation, Paul.

The subject of that letter is one of their own, and the named embodiment of the second fact we know about Philemon. Philemon owned slaves, or at least one slave: Onesimus. New Testament scholar Scot McKnight points out that this wasn't unusual. Slavery was rampant in the Roman Empire, including in Colossae. Scholars estimate that somewhere around 250,000 slaves were bought and sold each year within the empire, and slaves made up about 30% of the population. McKnight points out that this practice, though not race-based as in the American South, was every bit as oppressive and exploitative. Essentially, he

says, “slavery is inherently exploitation of an involuntary labor force for the sake of economic profit,” and slaves could be treated as harshly as their masters wished.¹ Beyond that, they were not free – not free to marry, not free to have a family, not free to go where they wished, not free to live as they chose. All of those things were determined by their masters, and all could be taken away by their masters at the drop of a hat, even if given previously.

It's not hard to see why slaves would want to run away, just like Onesimus did. We don't know what kind of master Philemon was – and just because he was a Christian didn't mean he was a kind master – but we know that slavery is fundamentally dehumanizing and oppressive. So for Onesimus to run away is not surprising. What may be surprising is what happened after he ran away.

¹ Scot McKnight, sermon given at BGAV Annual Meeting 2019.

You see, Paul came to care for Onesimus. He called Onesimus “my very heart.” In his time in prison, Onesimus has cared for him, provided for his needs. Maybe he brought him food. Maybe he helped him while he was sick. Maybe he took Paul’s letters to different places, helping Paul continue his work. And in the midst of that partnership, Onesimus became a Christian. He is now more than the runaway slave of Paul’s friend Philemon. Onesimus is now a brother, and Paul’s spiritual child, just as Philemon is. With all of that in mind, we may very well expect Paul to send a letter to Philemon, explaining what has happened and urging him to free Onesimus. Maybe Paul will even say, “I’m keeping Onesimus here. I’m so sure you’ll free him that I’m having him act as if he is already free.”

But Paul sees an opportunity here – one that, to be honest, bothers me a bit. He sees a chance for Philemon to

embrace the cost of discipleship – and he does it by sending Onesimus back. That bothers me, because I’m not nearly as certain that Philemon will overlook his own self-interest to do what Christ’s Gospel teaches as Paul was. But Paul is a true believer in the power of the Gospel to transform a person, even a slaveholder who hasn’t recognized the problems inherent in following a Savior of freedom while keeping human beings bound in slavery. Paul, after all, had been the teacher of Philemon – and he was already teaching what he proclaimed in Galatians 3, that “there is neither Jew nor Gentile, ***neither slave nor free***, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”² He knew Philemon understood this and believed this. Now Paul wanted to see if he would live it out.

² Galatians 3:28, emphasis mine

C.S. Lewis ~~and~~, in his popular book *Mere Christianity*, says, “Every one says forgiveness is a lovely idea, until they have something to forgive.”³ Taken more broadly, the teachings of Jesus are great, sound, and appreciated...until following them has a cost. And for slaveholders like Philemon, the idea that in Christ there is neither slave nor free – that slaves are equal to masters and brothers and sisters in Christ, and just maybe should be freed – that idea is great...until your Onesimus runs away.⁴ For Philemon to welcome Onesimus home without punishment is one thing. For Philemon to welcome Onesimus home as an equal – and maybe even free him – that’s another. That would cost Philemon something. That would make him follow the way of Jesus even when it hurts him – his wallet, his bottom line, but also maybe his whole way of life, because if Onesimus is

³ CS Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, p. 115

⁴ McKnight sermon

to be treated as an equal, even freed, then what about his other slaves? And without the slaves, how is he going to do business, run his shop, maintain his wealth? Could actually following Jesus' way and Paul's teachings, instead of just acknowledging them as true, cost Philemon? Could it cost him everything?

It very well could. And Paul knows it. But Paul doesn't let up. The entire letter is Paul working every angle he can to get Philemon to choose the costly path. He flatters Philemon, building him up for all the good he is doing. He offers grace to Philemon, for while Paul could order him to do something as his father in Christ, he doesn't force him, ~~because~~ because Paul would rather Philemon make the choice himself. Paul does, though, remind Philemon of how important Onesimus is to him – and appeal to Philemon's love for him, Paul, to affect how he treats the slave,

Onesimus. “So if you consider me a partner,” Paul says, “welcome him as you would welcome me.”⁵ Paul even offers to pay whatever economic hit Philemon has taken from Onesimus fleeing, though Philemon owes Paul his very self, his very soul.

Throughout the letter, Paul appeals to Philemon on every front he can imagine. And then he ends with a tantalizing...threat? Encouragement to obedience? Promise of accountability? “Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I ask. And one thing more: Prepare a guest room for me, because I hope to be restored to you in answer to your prayers.”⁶ Paul is confident Philemon will do as Paul asks – receive Onesimus as a brother – and indeed will do more than Paul asks. I take that as an innuendo that Philemon should free Onesimus.

⁵ Philemon 17

⁶ Philemon 21-22

And in case Philemon gets cold feet about living out what he professes to believe, Paul wraps up by saying, “And...I’ll be there soon. Get a room ready for me.”

We don’t know what Philemon did in response to this letter. There is a tradition that a bishop in the early church years later was named Onesimus, but we don’t know if it was *this* Onesimus. What we do know is that Paul had a very distinct view of faith: it wasn’t a faith that you believed with your head. It was a faith you lived out in your life, even if it cost you...everything. That’s the change Jesus brought, and that’s the change Paul taught.

Is it the faith we live today? Do we read the commands of this book and hold them to be true in our heads and our hearts alone? Or do we live them out in our lives...even when it costs us? Does our bank account show that we are taking the way of Jesus seriously? Do our calendars? How about

our relationships – with our families, with our workmates, with our school friends, with our neighbors, with those in our community? Do we live according to the way of Jesus...even when it costs us something? Even when it costs us everything? Paul looks to us, as he looked to Philemon, and speaks a word of encouragement: “Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I ask.”⁷ May we be found faithful to the call of Jesus, no matter the cost.

⁷ Philemon 21