“***As You Would Welcome Me***” by S. Finlan, at The First Church, Sep. 7, 2025

**Philemon 10–19, 21**

10I am appealing to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I have become during my imprisonment. . . 12 I am sending him, that is, my own heart, back to you. 13 I wanted to keep him with me so that he might minister to me . . . 14 but I preferred to do nothing without your consent, in order that your good deed might be voluntary and not something forced. 15Perhaps this is the reason Onesimus was separated from you for a while, so that you might have him back for ever, 16no longer as a slave but as more than a slave, a beloved brother . . .

17 So if you consider me your partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. 18If he has wronged you in any way or owes you anything, charge that to me. 19I . . . say nothing about your owing me even your own self. . . 21 Confident of your obedience, I am writing to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say.

**Luke 17:20–21**

20 Once Jesus was asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God was coming, and he answered, “The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed, 21 nor will they say, ‘Look, here it is!’ or ‘There it is!’ For, in fact,the kingdom of God is within you.”

The Letter to Philemon is one of the most neglected books of the Bible. Paul is writing to the wealthy Christian, Philemon, about Philemon’s runaway slave, Onesimus, who has been ministering to Paul while the apostle is in captivity. Paul led both of these men to Christ, so he is like a spiritual godfather to both of them. This means he has some rights to act as a leader or instructor to both of them, just like a father.

He has benefitted from Onesimus’ service to him and is so grateful to Onesimus that he even calls him his “heart” (v. 12), but he is not going to demand that Philemon let him stay and continue to serve Paul. Paul subtly asserts these rights over Philemon when he politely says “I preferred to do nothing without your consent” (v. 14), but he is hinting what he wants done. He wants Philemon to set Onesimus free, so that he can “have him back . . . no longer as a slave but as more than a slave, a beloved brother” (15–16).

Paul abides by the civil law by sending Onesimus back to his master. But, *spiritually* speaking, Paul has authority over *both* the master and the runaway slave, and his letter strongly *suggests* that Philemon *free* Onesimus, so that he will no longer be a slave. If Philemon considers Paul his partner, he will do what Paul asks. He will “welcome him as you would welcome me” (v. 17). If Philemon refuses to set him free, he is not treating Paul with the respect that is due him. Paul says “I say nothing about your owing me even your own self” (v. 19). But he *does* say something, and it is about as subtle as a sledge hammer.

Paul is using his authority, his soft power, we might say. And he is “confident of” Philemon’s “obedience” (v. 21). Notice that he uses the word obedience, even though he has not overtly *commanded* anything. In fact, “you will do even more than I say” (v. 21). In other words, I have confidence you will extend respect, equality, and Christian fellowship to Onesimus. Go above and beyond, Paul is saying, in showing fellowship.

So this letter refutes the commonly heard remark that the Bible supports slavery. Rather, Paul is telling Philemon that if he, Philemon, is a true Christian, he will not keep Onesimus as a slave, but will free him and welcome him as an equal. This is really the logical result of Jesus’ teaching that we are all children of God. And if a Christian master should free a Christian slave, should he not free *all* his slaves, so that they *all* might be treated as brothers? Let the circle be unbroken, and let it grow.

We can see these actions are not the approach of political revolution, but of spiritual *evolution.* We moderners sometimes fail to recognize that spirituality is *deeper* than politics, and has a gradual and *causative* effect upon politics. Here the spiritual value of brotherhood and respect underlies Paul’s advice to change the political status of one person.

What is the real basis for Paul’s request? Why should a slave be freed? It is because of the divinity within every person, as we see in Jesus’ saying, “the kingdom of God is within you” (Luke 17:21). Do you see how this spiritual principle has an explosive power, and could transform the political landscape? It says that God’s way, God’s values, reside within the individual person. Therefore each person ought to be highly valued.

Spiritual change happens gradually, and spiritual values penetrate society, usually under the radar. In fact, it happens the way that a lump of dough is leavened. It is like “yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened” (Luke 13:21). In the course of the mixing, the leaven permeates the dough. When it is baked, the whole thing rises and is easy to eat. So also, in the course of personal interactions, the gospel penetrates society as more and more people accept the gospel values. It is a deep and lasting change.

Political activity is sometimes very shallow and temporary. It can be like if a woman painted the outside of the dough with food coloring, changing its *outward* appearance but not its substance. As soon as the dough is mixed, the superficial painting disappears. Real change has to happen through and through: *internally*.

However, this God-centered process did not spread and become the norm in Christianity, the way it should have, because it met with the resistance of an upper class that wanted to be Christian in *appearance* and identity, while retaining class hierarchies, holding onto their slaves. Many Christian conversions lacked spiritual depth, and there was a re-patriarchalization of Christianity.

Jesus and Paul set forces in motion that would have gradually reduced or eliminated all the extreme hierarchic separations in society, not through a political movement, but through a real leavening of society by gospel values, bringing about a rising tide of transformed individuals and changed ethics. The world would have changed.

Unfortunately, that was halted by the re-assertion of political power and authoritarian customs, including the emergence of an authoritarian priesthood. The power of slaveholders and other authoritarians re-asserted itself within the church not long after Paul’s lifetime, and we even see it written into the text of the New Testament in some of the letters falsely attributed to the Apostle Paul, such as First Timothy and Titus.

It is in these letters, not written by Paul but attributed to him by church authorities, that we read such things as this: “Tell slaves to be submissive to their masters” (Titus 2:9); and slaves should “regard their masters as worthy of all honor” (1 Tim 6:1). Even Ephesians, which is closer to Paul in terms of time and influence, also says “Slaves, obey your earthly masters with respect and trembling” (Eph 6:5).

So we see that many passages in the Bible do *not* critique slavery. But these sentiments are clearly contrary to Paul’s own advice in the letter to Philemon. Parts of the New Testament affirm slavery, and they are more numerous than the passages in Philemon.

So yes—I value different parts of the New Testament differently. So do most Protestant churches, which no longer follow the severe rules of First Timothy, which says “I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent” (1 Tim 2:12). The *real* Paul greeted many women leaders, prophets, and deacons by name, and even one woman *apostle*: Junia (Rom 16:7). You can’t reconcile that with First Timothy’s patriarchal clamp-down. First Timothy 5 even sneers at the “younger widows” having meetings in private homes, “gadding about from house to house” (1 Tim 5:11, 13).

There really are different value systems and theologies in different books of the Bible. You have to be a discerning and thoughtful reader, choosing what to believe. Some people refer to this with the put-down of “cherry-picking.” I say it is the responsible and necessary practice of *discernment* and choosing. Not all parts of the Bible say the same thing. They reflect the thoughts of different authors. We have an obligation to do our best in discerning the truth. Fortunately, we have the Spirit within to help us, but that does not raise our interpretations above the level of human fallibility. We have to use our *minds* as well as our hearts to seek and to find the truth.

Let me sum up my main points. One is that *real* change is *inward*, like the changing of a whole lump of dough by leavening, which makes it expansive. The other point I made is that the gospel changes society through moral and spiritual change, not by political activism. Political activity and campaigning are legitimate, but they are not the job of the church. The church’s job is to get ahold of the *real* leaven—spiritual value and meaning—and to sprinkle it into people’s lives.

I used the letter to Philemon as an example of a sprinkling of gospel values by Paul, trying to persuade a man to free another man from slavery, which, of course, would be a huge political change for Onesimus. People can begin to heal, even from very severe conflicts, if they remember the gospel values, and extend respect to everyone. Of course, we also need to be freed from our own inward slavery, our fears, our addictions and bad habits—but that’s a sermon for another day. Today’s sermon was to say that Christian values have a deep effect and that, as Christians, we must be ready to receive anyone as a beloved brother.

They will know we are Christians by our love.