

“Private Matters/Public Choices”

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¹Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, To Philemon our dear friend and co-worker, ²to Apphia our sister, to Archippus our fellow soldier, and to the church in your house:

³Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

⁴When I remember you in my prayers, I always thank my God ⁵because I hear of your love for all the saints and your faith toward the Lord Jesus. ⁶I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective when you perceive all the good that we may do for Christ. ⁷I have indeed received much joy and encouragement from your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you, my brother.

⁸For this reason, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do your duty, ⁹yet 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. ¹⁰I am appealing to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I have become during my imprisonment. ¹¹Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful both to you and to me. ¹²I am sending him, that is, my own heart, back to you. ¹³I wanted to keep him with me, so that he might be of service to me in your place during my imprisonment for the gospel; ¹⁴but 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 he was separated from you for a while, so that you might have him back forever, ¹⁶no 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.

¹⁷So 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 my account. ¹⁹I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand: I will repay it. I say nothing about your owing me even your own self. ²⁰Yes, brother, let me have this benefit from you in the Lord! Refresh my heart in Christ. ²¹Confident of your obedience, I am writing to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say.

(Philemon 1-21)

This brief letter introduces us to the triangular relationship between three men: Paul, Philemon, and Onesimus. Scholars dispute the actual nature of the relationships, but if we take the language of the letter at face value, the story goes something like this...

Paul, who describes himself in the letter as an “old man,” has been a missionary for the church for a while. He is in jail – again – and in prison he has befriended a fellow inmate named Onesimus. Onesimus was a runaway slave. We do not know what offense landed him in prison, but we do know that Onesimus is a fellow Christian, and that he and Paul have formed a special spiritual bond during their imprisonment. Through it all, Paul has become a father figure to Onesimus, whom Paul calls “my child” and “my own heart.”

Philemon, the person to whom Paul is writing, has been – and by law probably still was -- Onesimus’ master and legal owner. He is also a Christian – Paul’s “dear friend and coworker” in the faith. Philemon is a respected leader in his community with a prominent congregation that meets in his own home, and positive reports of his “love for all the saints” and his “faith toward the Lord Jesus” have made it back to Paul.

In his letter, Paul writes to Philemon individually, because he is making an important request that only Philemon can grant. Onesimus, now freed from jail, is planning to return



to Philemon's house, and this letter will accompany the runaway slave back to his place of bondage. Paul wants Philemon to welcome Onesimus back into the home "no longer as a slave, but more than a slave – a beloved brother... both in the flesh and in the Lord."

Paul knows that he could command Philemon to accept him this way, but Paul does not play that card – at least not overtly. He chooses instead to appeal to Philemon's conscience and faith. Instead of pulling rank and issuing a demand, Paul appeals to Philemon "on the basis of love." Philemon himself must decide what to do with the runaway slave who voluntarily returns to his master's house.

As you might imagine, readers across the centuries have seriously questioned Paul's approach. Why did Paul not just say outright that slavery was wrong? Why didn't Paul use his apostolic authority and just tell Philemon, "This is how this is going to go... Onesimus is no longer your slave. Period."? These are very legitimate questions, especially given the painful truth that this little book, along with a few other misused passages from the Old and New Testaments, were employed by many in the American church to justify the abhorrent institution of slavery. This is a serious moral question. Moreover, if Paul loved Onesimus as he said he did, how could he play so fast and loose with his safety? This wasn't just a theoretical question for Philemon. For the runaway slave, Onesimus, it was a life and death gamble.

I will not pretend to answer these questions. What I do want to try to do this morning is look at how Paul presents the choice. Say what we will about the apostle Paul, he was a master at rhetoric, and this letter represents some of his best rhetorical work. Even if Paul does not mandate an outcome, he does make his preference very clear with obvious appeals to reason, sentimentality, and more than a little guilt. In fact, Paul feels so good about the arguments he has made to Philemon that he closes his case with the line, "Confident of your obedience... I know that you will do even more than I say."

The smartest rhetorical move Paul makes, I would argue, is to transform what was essentially a private matter into a very public choice. Don't you think Philemon would have preferred to keep this whole matter quiet? A runaway slave was a lot of things to Philemon – a public embarrassment, an economic loss, a personal affront. I bet Philemon didn't really want to talk about any of that. Paul, however, does not address his letter to Philemon alone. He also sends it to fellow church leaders – Apphia and Archippus. But not just them. He also addresses it "to the church in [Philemon's] house." Paul wanted his words read to everyone in the church – so everyone would know what was really going on.

This brilliant strategy of making a private matter a public choice reminds me of a joke that is so old I can't remember the first time I heard it. Two older Southern women were sitting up in the front pew of the church, as they liked to do. The preacher was laying out a fiery sermon on sin, and they were loving it. When the preacher condemned the sin of stealing, the ladies cried out at the top of their lungs, "AMEN, BROTHER!"

When he cast shame on the sin of failing to honor one's father and mother, they yelled again, "PREACH IT, REVEREND!"

And when he condemned the sin of lying and bearing false witness, that got them up on their feet. "RIGHT ON, BROTHER," they yelled, "TELL IT LIKE IT IS!"

But when the preacher turned to the sin of gossip, the two got very still and quiet. One of them turned to the other and said, "**Now he's quit preaching and gone to meddlin'.**"

We love it when someone condemns a sin that we don't have much trouble with, but when it comes to our own vulnerabilities – when the conversation turns to something we

would rather not talk about or gets a bit too personal. Philemon was a great supporter of Paul, a great colleague in the work of the early church, but when Paul took a very sensitive private matter and made it the business of the whole church, Philemon must have thought that Paul had quit preachin' and gone to meddlin'.

Paul did this in at least four different ways. The first relates to **money**. As Curtis Jackson, the rapper known as "50 Cent," has said, "People who actually have money don't want to talk about it. They want to talk about everything else." It's an old social convention that we probably get from our British roots – it's gauche to talk publicly about money, and the question of what Philemon should do about Onesimus had a lot to do with money. Ironically, the literal translation of the name "Onesimus" means "useful" or "profitable," and Paul uses this coincidence to his rhetorical advantage. "You used to treat him like he was "useless" or "unprofitable," Paul wrote, "but we all know that he is "profitable" to both of us. He was worth his weight in gold to their ministry, to the church, and to the world. And now the whole church was going to be weighing that worth, talking openly about Philemon's money.

The second thing Paul exposes to public scrutiny involves **personal relationships**. This is another thing that many of us consider private. We have to know someone pretty well before we go meddling in the details of their relationships with spouses, children, their bosses, and coworkers. Even so, Paul preached about these very things a lot – how spouses should behave in the context of marriage... how parents should treat children... even how masters and slaves should treat one another. We can criticize Paul for some of the things he said or didn't say, but Paul was not afraid to get down into the difficult weeds of personal relationships, and he usually advocated in favor of equality and mutual respect to a degree that few others in his day would dare to try. And Paul clearly had some pointed advice on how Philemon should treat his brother Onesimus.

Another way Paul meddled in private affairs was in his discussions of **morality**. Most of us bristle when someone suggests that our actions have been immoral. Even in a private context, we are likely to respond to such a challenge with a stiff "How dare you?" In more public contexts, we most likely default to the language of rights. We would much rather talk about what we are legally entitled to do as opposed to what it is morally right for us to do.

All three of these topics that we consider very personal and private – money, relationships, and morality – are all factors in the fourth taboo subject, which may actually be the biggest one: the question of **faith**.

In a 2016 survey of American adults, the Pew Foundation found that sixteen percent (16%) of them never spoke about religion with people outside of their family. An additional thirty-three percent (33%) said they rarely did. And get this -- about forty percent said they very rarely spoke about religion *even within their immediate family*. Thirteen percent (13%) said they never spoke about religion with their spouses or children – twenty-six percent (26%) said almost never.¹

In this letter, Paul ignores all of these unwritten rules. In a very public way, he basically airs out Philemon's dirty laundry – how he handles his money and investments; how he manages his personal relationships; how his moral decisions are stacking up; and what all of this may ultimately be saying about Philemon's Christian faith. All of it is brought out

¹ "Many Americans Don't Argue About Religion – Or Even Talk About It." <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/04/15/>, accessed August 29, 2022.

into the open in front of the whole church. I don't know about you, but that does not sound like a very comfortable thing to me.

Paul, however, is not primarily concerned about comfort. Paul's primary concern is the health and vitality of the body of Christ, and faith in Christ is not something that can be lived out behind closed doors. Life in Christ is something lived out in the open, in a community of believers. Especially in America, we have worked really hard to make it a private, individual thing – something just between us and God. But it was never like that for Christ. Think about it. He didn't call the original disciples one by one. They were called in batches or groups. Later, Christ sent seventy of them out in groups, two by two, telling them not to keep their light hidden. *"You are the light of the world,"* Jesus says. *"No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven."*² Christian faith has never been a purely internal thing. Genuine, living faith can only take shape in a community. Does that kind of faith bring some vulnerability with it? Yes, it does. But it also makes us distinctive.

It also makes us powerful. Some of you might have heard the name Jim Wallis. He is the founder of Sojourners, a progressive ministry that has been a leader in Christian advocacy for gender equality, care for the earth, and social justice for all people. Jim Wallis has famously said that "faith is always personal, but never private." If faith is purely private, he says, then it is drained of much of its power to address and remedy the real and practical problems that plague many of God's people.

"If you're trying to change the world," Wallis says, "and you don't have a sustaining inner life or faith, you'll burn out, become angry and ideological, and eventually violent." But if you never share your faith in any real way... if it never prompts you to take a risk or make ourselves vulnerable with a public profession, then nothing changes. "It's a balance," Wallis writes, "an integral relationship between the inner life and our life in the world."³

Notably, this kind of vulnerability is something that this congregation says that it wants. In the 2020 Mission Study that was completed during the pastoral transition, many of you said that you wanted to push yourselves to deepen your sense of connection both to God and to one another. Specifically, you said you wanted Larchmont Avenue Church to be "a safe haven where both joys and burdens can be shared... a place where we feel safe sharing our failures as well as our successes." What that language describes is a community that is willing to increase its mutual vulnerability in order to increase the shared feeling of mutual care and support.

And that is exactly what Paul wanted for Philemon. Paul wanted the church in Philemon's house to be a place where faith was personal, but not private. He wanted them to open their lives up just a little bit more so that the church could work together to make their financial decisions, their relationship decisions, their moral decisions, and their faith decisions a little more loving... a little more righteous... a little more Christ-like.

We don't know what happened there, when the letter arrived... what happened to the money... what happened to the relationships... what moral course was taken... how the faith of Philemon and his house church changed. But we do have a clue.

² Matthew 5:14-16.

³ <https://sojo.net/articles/faith-always-personal-never-private>

Around the end of the first century, Ignatius of Antioch referred in his written correspondence to the man who succeeded Timothy as the bishop of Ephesus, one of the first churches planted by Paul, and one of the most important segments of the early church. That bishop's name was Onesimus.

Was it a coincidence? Perhaps. Or perhaps we can deduce that, when Paul pushed Philemon to let a private matter be a public choice, somehow it cracked a closed door open just enough for God to transform a slave into a brother... a brother into a bishop... and a little house church into the body of Christ.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.