

Philemon 1-21

Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother,

To our beloved coworker Philemon, to our sister Apphia, to our fellow soldier Archippus, and to the church in your house:

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

I thank my God always when I mention you in my prayers, because I hear of your love for all the saints and your faith toward the Lord Jesus. I pray that the partnership of your faith may become effective as you comprehend all the good that we share in 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 more than bold enough in Christ to command you to do the right thing, 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 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 minister 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 for the long term, 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 me. 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 ask.

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 coworkers.

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.*

Signs of the Times - White Supremacy - September 4, 2022

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Imagine a world where, merely because of the color of your skin, you could be granted or denied access to the basics of life. I'm talking about things as basic as a place to live, health care, access to clean drinking water, and education. Imagine a world where certain people whose skin happened to be not as dark as others had full control of making and enforcing the laws which governed everybody. Imagine a world where, because of the color of your skin, you were portrayed in the media as being intellectually inferior, lazy, and lacking any appreciable talents. Imagine a world where those with lighter skin controlled the stockpile of guns, and the police and their dogs were trained to attack people with darker skin.

Imagine? No, not imagine. This is reality and it has been so for hundreds of years all over the world.

I hope we are all aware that racial discrimination on the basis of skin color — I won't even say race — was enshrined in the laws of many southern and even some northern states until the 1960s. The simple truth is that no matter what the law currently says or has said about racial discrimination in the United States, it is still very much a fact of life. Consider, for example, the drinking water situations in Jackson, Mississippi and Flint, Michigan. Two small cities with predominately African-American populations. Two small cities whose infrastructure was woefully outdated. Two small cities where state governments had the opportunity to invest in bringing the water systems up to code but somehow could not find the resources or the will to do so. As a result, for nearly a year the residents of Flint had to drink contaminated water from poisonous lead pipes. And as a result, the people of Jackson have very little water to drink, cook with, bathe with, or even fight fires with.

Why? In the United States, there are many in this country who don't consider African-Americans to be 100% human. For that matter, there are many in this country who don't consider Asian-Americans or Latinx people or anybody who can't trace their ancestry to the United Kingdom or perhaps Northern Europe to be 100% human.

Millions of Americans question why they should spend their tax dollars to educate, care for, or otherwise insure the necessities of life are avail to people who, frankly, don't "look like them." They may not "talk like them," "act like them," or "smell like them." Therefore, they can't be human beings, can they?

Friends, one of the most shocking things about the MAGA movement for me has been realizing how mistaken I have been about the idea that irrelevant issues like skin color, culture, or language nevertheless still loom extremely large in terms of how some people judge each other in 2022.

Until a few years ago, I really thought the idea of diversity and the embracing the beauty of diversity as a hallmark of our society was becoming the norm. In the 1980s I lived in the southern African nation of Botswana, which borders on South Africa. In the 80s, South Africa was going through the last, most vicious stages of its system of legal segregation called Apartheid. The South African laws separating and classifying human beings based on skin color or ethnicity were every bit as vicious as those found in the United States if not even worse. In the eighties, the government was desperately trying to cling to power, passing more and more restrictive laws — even forbidding white people from criticizing the regime in public.

Governments using all means to stay in office. Laws abridging free speech, rewriting textbooks, making more and more people subject to government supervision? That was South Africa in the 80s. It is certainly what Florida and Texas are becoming today.

All this, all this in the name of the evil doctrine of white supremacy. An inherent sin embedded in nearly every human being is the perverse need for us as individuals and as groups to feel somehow superior to others. The current war on transgendered people stems from the fact that legally, almost every other way people can be classified or segregated have some legal protections. Gender, race, sexual orientation, ethnicity, disability, skin color. All are somewhat protected under federal law except transgendered folks. So, hey, let's go after them!

But no matter what the law says, the idea still saturates America that because we are an offshoot of England, those with English surnames who can trace their genealogies back to the 1700's are the leading race and ethnicity in America. Everyone else, sorry, is suspect. And, God forbid, you look really different from an English person because of your color, hair, or other bodily features, then you're really suspect. You know, it's fine to have an African-American play on your favorite team (especially if they are winners). It's fine to laugh at Chris Rock. But how many so-called fans want them living next door?

Today's lesson is the letter of the apostle Paul to a man named Philemon. The entire letter. I just read all of it to you. One chapter, 21 verses. The letter to Philemon is one of those biblical books the church wishes would just go away. While on the surface, the letter is a simple plea from Paul to Philemon to take back his possibly escaped slave Onesimus, when you dig into it, what Paul is asking

Philemon to do is quite radical and unprecedented. The book of Philemon is putting Paul's assertion that all Christians are equal into action. And that, friends, is a huge problem for those who support white supremacy.

In fact, friends, it is a huge problem for the entire Church of Jesus Christ. With, perhaps — and I mean perhaps — good intentions, the Christian Faith has been more or less imposed on the world. For the first 300 years of the Church, winning people or groups to Christ was accomplished by proclaiming and demonstrating Christ's message of radical love, acceptance, and forgiveness to a hurting world. The point: following Jesus is a superior way to understanding God than other belief systems — especially in light of the mostly very brutal and dehumanizing religions that were dominating the world at the time.

Tragically, however, once the Roman Empire made Christianity the official religion, the Romans imposed their new faith on their subjects the same way they imposed their government. In other words, all persons had to obey the Emperor and his officials. Likewise, all persons had to worship Jesus and follow the orders of the Church. There was no process of leading people to Christ with a message of humility and justice. There was just “obey or die!”

Do you see how imposing Christ from above — even if his message is right — can do and did far more damage than the ostensible goal of merely filling churches? More importantly, imposing Christ from above was instrumental in creating a gap between the conquerors and the conquered.

Obviously, in the minds of the Romans and all conquerors who came after, they were superior to the people they defeated. Superior in battle, superior in religion, and therefore, by implication, superior in all other ways. We won. You lost. We are better than you!

Do you see the seeds of White Supremacy being planted in the world centuries ago? While it was the Romans in the 3rd Century, it morphed into the Europeans by the 15th century. By the 1400's Europeans gained the ability to navigate ships-over much of the known world. They did so for trade but they also did so to “civilize” the various native groups they conquered. The Europeans had the weapons to fight and to win. The Europeans therefore assumed they had the right to force their Christ on the people they defeated. With such a mindset, isn't it easy to see why many white people had and still hold to the evil idea that they are superior to Africans, Asians, Native Americans and all other people who are different. We can beat you in war. Our religion and our culture must therefore replace yours. Aren't you lucky that we found you so we can make you follow our Jesus! Hence White Supremacy blossomed 500 years ago and blooms still.

But in this short letter to his friend Philemon, the apostle Paul turns the entire idea of superior vs. inferior upside down. A man called Onesimus was a slave owned by Philemon. For whatever reason, Onesimus left Philemon without permission and found himself in the care of Paul. Perhaps he was being mistreated. Perhaps he wanted to be free. But Onesimus committed one of the worst crimes someone could commit in the Roman Empire by running away from his master.

Under Roman Law, Philemon had the right to kill Onesimus. As a slave, Onesimus had no rights. He had no legal existence. He was the same as a dog or cow. In other words, Onesimus was not human. So Paul has a problem. His friend's slave shows up unexpectedly. It was Paul who brought Philemon to Jesus because Paul had stayed and taught in Philemon's home. Obviously, Onesimus knew Paul and more importantly, Onesimus knew that Paul constantly taught that in Jesus Christ all human beings are equal. Period. No gender differences because Paul said in Christ there is no male or female. No ethnic differences because Paul said Jew and Greek were equal. And most importantly, Paul said there were no differences in status because slave and free are also equal.

The conclusion, friends, is obvious. Far from being Philemon's property, the slave Onesimus was in fact Philemon's brother, Philemon's equal! This is an astounding conclusion! The implications were and are world changing. If the slave Onesimus is indeed the equal of his master Philemon, what does that imply about all human relationships going forward? Suddenly there can be no distinction between the conqueror and conquered. They are equal.

Remember that from the 4th century onward, all conquerors made a point of forcing the ones they conquered to follow Jesus Christ. Whether they were other European peoples near Rome, or Africans or Native Americans, or Indians, or the Aborigines of Australia, the conquerors forcibly converted those they defeated to Christianity.

By implication, friends, that means that if you were to go back far enough in your family line, whether decades or centuries, you would unquestionably find that many of your forebears were forcibly converted to Christ. This was wrong and still is wrong. Nonetheless, for billions of humans, ancestors converted willingly or by force, Jesus overcame the circumstances of our ancestors' conversions and helps us realize the fundamental truth and power of unconditional love in the world even though love was the last thing on the minds of the conquerors. A paradox, yes. The ends never justify the means. Never. But there is also no turning back the clock.

In one simple letter, Paul declares to his friend Philemon that his former slave Onesimus is his brother in Christ and must be treated that way going forward. With that assertion, Paul therefore destroys any

religious basis for White Supremacy. The conquerors brought the conquered to Christ. They therefore should have treated them as equal brothers and sisters going forward.

Obviously, that did not happen. White Supremacy is still woven deeply into the fabric of America and that of many other cultures around the world. But one thing is clear: no followers of Christ may claim that their evil and destructive ideas on White Supremacy have any sanction from Jesus Christ — no matter how hard the his Church has worked to maintain inequality over the centuries. Paul wrote his words 2000 years ago and only now sadly but thankfully his ideas are starting to bear fruit.

And that is our challenge. We must not fear to examine ourselves and our beliefs regarding our relationships with all persons, regardless of race, nationality, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, disability, and all the other horrible and artificial ways we segregate ourselves from one other. Jesus Christ is about love, radical love, unconditional and totally embracing love. And that, that, that is only acceptable way forward.

I say these words in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.