

My name is Philemon.

I guess I And if you don't know me –can't really blame you. St. Paul did write me a letter – but a very short one. In fact, it is the shortest letter in the New Testament – all of 25 verses long – you heard about half of it today – and if you want the rest, then you have to do it on your own – because this is the only time in the 3 year cycle of readings that my letter is read.

I was a member of the Christian community of Colossae – certainly you have read St. Paul's letter to the Colossians – which was just a bit longer than the one he wrote me. . .

St. Paul's letter to me is brief – because it basically has only one point: inviting me to take my entrance into the inverted world of the teachings of Christ seriously – specifically that I as a Christian – have to live a life consistent with my beliefs:

That is, I can't be one way on Sunday: loving, merciful, and forgiving with those I worship with [and of course expecting to be treated as such by God and them] --and then live my life anyway I want Monday through Saturday.

Either I am a Christian – or I am not. And if a Christian – then the values I believe and profess have to have an effect on my life 24/7.

And that just was not the case for me at the time Paul wrote me – which was sometime between 55 and 63 A.D. – long before any of the four Gospels were written. . .

Slavery was legal in the Roman Empire at that time – so I wasn't breaking any laws by having slaves – Paul just wanted to remind me that just because something is legal – doesn't mean it is morally right. In particular, Paul was worried about my slave Onesimus – who had run away from me, and had spent some time with Paul. Onesimus became a Christian while he was away. Paul is writing to me because he is now sending Onesimus back to me.

Paul is not going to tell me what to do – so that the good he is hoping I will choose to do – is not something forced upon me – but something I freely choose to do. For it is only when we are willing to do something without counting the cost to us, without worrying about the outcome – without concern for the potential yield to ourselves --- that we are truly doing something out of love: which is THE measure of everything done for the sake of the kingdom of God.

Paul has great faith in me – he truly believes in me --- so he wants me to freely choose to bring about the kingdom of God in my sphere of influence by doing the right thing --- which would not be to punish Onesimus for running away –

And actually giving Onesimus – and the rest of my slaves – their freedom.

Paul knows I was there in the house Church of Colossae when Tychicus brought that letter from him – and we read it aloud – and then passed it on to those in Laodicea as Paul requested.

In that letter to us, the Colossians --- Paul told us Christ is the image of the invisible God – the first born of all creation. And because Christ now dwells in us – we are a new creation – and so have to act differently than before we were Baptized.

Paul told us, “we have to take off the old self with its practices – and put on a new self.”

And with our new selves, standing as a new creation: “there is no Greek or Jew, no barbarian, Scythian, slave or free person: but Christ is all and in all.” (Col 3:10-11)

My oh my, this Christianity stuff is not as easy as I thought it would be! But I'm sure you know that, too. Since I am a new creation – since I am a new creation – I actually have to change my behavior – perhaps even do something counter-cultural – in order to be MORE LIKE CHRIST! That is, if I am taking all of this seriously!

I guess I can always just keep going to Church, try my best not to be challenged by the words of Scripture – and then keep living life the way I've always done – that is doing my own thing!
But that would be spending myself for the sake of a kingdom of my own making --- not spending myself for the kingdom of God.

Paul was being especially persuasive with me – because I was somewhat of a leader at Colossae – people in the community looked up to me. So he wanted me to be a good example – wanting people to think if Philemon can do it – then there is hope for me!

After all, that's why Jesus was so hard on the scribes and the Pharisees – they were leaders in the community, too – and people looked up to them – but they kept doing things their way, rather than the way of God and God's kingdom. Blind fools – Jesus called them – because they claimed to be in right relationship with God and others – but their hearts were hardened – and they were far from the kingdom of God. I certainly don't want to be like them!

So my brothers and sisters in Christ --- as you stand in the image of Christ as a new creation – just like me ---- pray for me – that I might do the right thing, even it is a very difficult thing.

And I will pray for you – as I am sure there are many times you find living as a Christian difficult to do also. Especially if you are trying to live consistently --- every day, 24/7 – with the values you profess on Sunday.

You know as well as I do – the world can be a pretty scary place to step back into once we leave the comfort of the Sunday community behind:

So, I also pray that you will never tire of spending yourself for the sake of the kingdom of God. There is always sacrifice involved: the giving of time, talent and treasure for the sake of others – rather than building bigger barns to store it all.

As Jesus tells you today – it is much like constructing a tower or marching into battle – living the Christian life takes effort, the wise use of resources, and persistence. It's like taking up a cross – everyday. . .

So also never tire of asking for the help, the grace you need to be a good example – a faithful witness to the one who spent his life for our salvation: Jesus Christ, the head of the body, the Church.

Hope to see you at the narrow gate!