

# Opening the Word: The cost of dispossession



In the canon of the New Testament, Philemon is strange. It is short, written directly to a prominent Christian whose name is Philemon. Philemon owned a slave named Onesimus, who likely escaped from his master, taking money.

Onesimus came to Paul, and now Paul has sent Onesimus back with an exhortation. Paul wanted to “keep” Onesimus, not as a slave, but as a fellow prisoner of the Gospel. Onesimus met Paul, discovering the Good News that Jesus Christ has conquered death, and has been baptized.

He now returns to Philemon, not as his slave, but as his brother in Jesus Christ. This will require Philemon to dispossess himself of his previous relationship with Onesimus, treating him not as a runaway slave, but as he would treat Paul – a fellow preacher of the Gospel.

Paul’s letter to Philemon likely makes us a bit uncomfortable. Paul doesn’t condemn slavery as an institution.

But Paul didn’t live in an age where an end of slavery was possible. The Church had no institutional authority to end the practice of slavery! After all, Paul is writing Philemon from prison after he was arrested for preaching the Gospel.

[23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time – Sept. 8, 2019](#)

WIS 9:13-18B

PS 90:3-4, 5-6, 12-13, 14, 17

PHMN 9-10, 12-17

LK 14:25-33

Paul does ask that Philemon cease treating Onesimus as a slave. He is no longer owned by Philemon, strictly speaking,

since he has become a prisoner of Jesus Christ.

This epistle is aptly paired with Jesus' exhortation to his disciples that hatred of mother and father is necessary for discipleship.

Again, these words should make us uncomfortable. Don't we bless mothers and fathers after the baptism of their child? Don't we celebrate the gift of the family, the domestic Church?

Some preachers of this text may seek to lighten their effect. Jesus doesn't mean that families are unimportant. He is merely asking us that we order things properly. Love Jesus, then you can love other things.

But Jesus' words are stronger than this. Christ is noting that when we become his disciples, every other relationship changes. To choose Jesus means that we follow him no matter the cost. Even if that means leaving our mother and our father. Even if that means, for Philemon, giving up Onesimus as a slave and treating him as brother.

Jesus is asking his disciples to calculate their willingness to follow these words. Sit down for a bit, take a step back, and recognize what Our Lord is asking from us. Discipleship means choosing Christ above all else, even above one's mother or father. It means dispossessing ourselves of everything but Jesus Christ.

Now ask yourself, "Can you do this?" If you're like me, you can't do it on your own. You love your possessions, your relationships, maybe even your status. Can I really give all this up?

You can't. But Jesus can. This is the gift of Christianity.

Dispossession is not the practice of apathy, steeling ourselves against the disappointment of loss. Dispossession is

giving everything over to Jesus Christ, even our desire to serve him alone.

The cost of dispossession is therefore control, giving up a neatly ordered universe where we arrange things as they make sense to us. We set up our quaint hierarchies of order, only to see them demolished by the Son of God.

In Christ, as we hear in Paul's letter to the Galatians, there is neither slave nor free person. There is neither woman nor man.

Because we belong to Jesus Christ, everything is up for grabs. Every relationship, every sense of order in our lives.

Dispossession is costly.

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