

Entitled to a Cross

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Scriptures: Deuteronomy 30:15–20; Psalm 1; Philemon; Luke 14:25–33

I want to retire a particular use of a word from the English language. It has well outlived its usefulness. And so I am pleading today that we retire using the word “entitled” as an insult. If you don’t like the way somebody is behaving, they are, all of a sudden, “entitled.” It would not take you very long to search on the internet and find this word used as a jab to attack the rich, the poor, employers, employees, younger people, older people, parents, and children. The pervasive attitude seems to be that everyone else, when they are doing something that I dislike or asking for something I don’t think they deserve, they are “acting entitled,” but when I advocate for what I feel I deserve, that is a just thing to do. “Anything I don’t like is entitlement,” is not a healthy way to engage with the world, and it keeps me from the all-important question of whether I am acting like I deserve things I have not earned, which is much more relevant to my life and well-being than things strangers are doing. When everyone is entitled but me, that makes for a pretty sad and small world. A world in need of a dose of reality.

Philemon was someone who was in need of a dose of reality, and the Apostle Paul delivered that very thing. It is not that Philemon didn’t understand the ways in which the world works, but he was unaware of the ways in which his participation in the Kingdom of God had changed the nature of his world.

The subject of Paul's letter to Philemon and the rest of the church family of which he was a part is a man named Onesimus, a slave who had escaped Philemon's house seeking his own freedom, had run into and ministered with Paul, and whom Paul was sending back to Philemon's house. But while the normal course of action would be severe punishment for an escaped slave that had returned, which could even mean death, Paul says that Onesimus is no longer Philemon's slave, but his brother.

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Life in the Kingdom of God reframes everything in the life of the Christian. As Jesus reminds us in our Gospel reading for today, our identity in Christ is more important than even the relationships we hold most dear. There is no corner of our lives that is not touched by the gospel. Life for the Christian takes on the shape of the cross, a cross we are called to bear daily. Philemon may have started reading the letter feeling that he was entitled to the ownership of the slave he had purchased or inherited. We come today, whether we want to admit it or not, with the idea that we are entitled to a certain number of things ourselves. What Jesus reminds those of us who follow him is that what we are entitled to is a cross to carry.

That cross is the lens through which all of life is reframed. To embrace the way of the cross is to choose the way of life presented in Deuteronomy Chapter 30 and to walk in the way of the one who delights in God's law in Psalm 1. The wisdom of God, his way, is revealed most clearly in our crucified savior who tells us to pick up our own cross.

¹ See Bird and Wright, *The New Testament in Its World*, 366-7.

And we could end right there. Pick up your cross. But Jesus doesn't do that. He tells us to do so with open eyes. What is the cost of following him? What is the cost of carrying the name of Christ and the cross that comes with it? The way of cruciform wisdom comes with a high cost, and we would be foolish not to consider it. Jesus gives the example of those planning a building project and a king about to go to war. If the builders don't establish and stick to a budget, the project won't be completed. If a king doesn't consider the number of his opponents forces in contrast with his own, he is in for disaster. So we too should count the cost of following Jesus. The reframe that the cross gives is indeed the way of life, but it carries with it cost and consequences.

And so with that lens of a costly reframing project, I want to look more closely at Paul's letter to Philemon, and I ask you to consider with me how this text shows us 1) how the gospel redefines our world, 2) how that can cost us, and finally, 3) how that cost is absolutely worth it.

So let's look at Philemon a little more closely together. (Turn to page 1000 in your pew Bible if you want to follow along for yourself.) Before Paul gets to the matter at hand, he praises Philemon for a way in which he has already embraced the new life of the Kingdom, his faith and love:

"4 I thank my God always when I remember you in my prayers, 5 because I hear of your love and of the faith that you have toward the Lord Jesus and for all the saints, 6 and I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective for the full knowledge of every good thing that is in us for the sake of Christ. 7 For I have derived much joy and comfort from your love, my brother, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you."

The Gospel reframes what is praiseworthy and valuable. When you meet someone, you usually ask them about one of two things. If they are of working age, you ask them about what they do for a living or if they are younger, what they are studying. You may also ask about their family - are they married? Do they have kids? Grandkids? It is a little less polite to ask, but we also find ourselves wondering about how much money people have, how well-connected they are in the community, how “important” they are. These are not the sort of things that Paul commends in Philemon. What does he praise? Love and faith toward God, and the building up of the saints in love.

That is a total shift in value systems that carries a cost living in our society. Faith and love aren't exactly the sorts of things that make a LinkedIn profile really pop. But we are not chasing earthly fame, success and praise, not those of us in the cruciform way of Jesus. And yes that may cost us a promotion that would cause us to compromise our values, it may cost us people thinking we have the right goals to truly be successful, but the bounty that we receive, a life filled with the love of the saints and trust in God, is of so much greater value than anything the world can offer us.

Keeping these higher things in mind is an effective lead-in for Paul's main point in writing the letter. Onesimus is coming back, and Philemon is to see him from a different, higher point of view. There is a lot going on here, so let's take it verse by verse. Paul appeals to that love for which he has just commended Philemon, saying that while he could command him as an apostle (verse 8), he prefers to stay in the spirit of love that Philemon has already demonstrated (verse 9). It's as if Paul is

saying, “I could tell you what to do, but I am not going to. I’m going to appeal out of the common love we have for God and for one another.” In verse 10, Paul begins to shift Philemon’s view of Onesimus, this person that was known to Philemon as his slave. Paul calls him his own son. “Philemon, we are not dealing with a person you own, but my own child.” That’s a big shift and shows us what is coming.

Verse 11 is a bit of wordplay. Paul says that Onesimus was useless to Philemon before, but is now indeed useful to him. What we lose in the English translation is that Onesimus’ name is the word for useful, a name that could perhaps suggest that Onesimus was born into slavery and his very name reflects that lower societal status. But Paul turns that on his head. He was not useful before as a slave, but now as my son, as my very heart Paul says in verse 12, he is now useful to both of us.

Paul gets to the point in verses 15 and 16:

“15 For this perhaps is why he was parted from you for a while, that you might have him back forever, 16 no longer as a bondservant but more than a bondservant, as a beloved brother—especially to me, but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord.”

And there it is. Paul is saying to Philemon that the cruciform way of the gospel changes the way we see people. The one you thought was your useful slave is your brother.

One of the lies of the world is that other people exist to serve as means to our happiness, our desired ends. A belief in that lie is what allowed the evil of slavery to

persist on the global scale in the past and in more hidden ways today. And every time we use one another for our own selfish ends, we stoke that same flame that convinced so many that it was ok for one person to own another.

But as Paul is trying to show Philemon, things are not so in the Kingdom of God. We don't own our brothers, our sisters. Our siblings do not exist for our sake, I hate to tell you all you fellow first-borns out there.

And there is a cost to Philemon. He is going to lose some free labor. This puts him back materially. Just as if we refuse to exploit people we will miss out on some opportunities for material gain. But look at what we receive when the people around us change from things to siblings.

If you want to know the goodness of gaining a sibling, you can ask my son. Because as many of you know he is getting a brother or a sister in February. Just a few months ago, before Charlie knew about our new addition, we were playing at a playground when a family of three kids came up and started playing with him.. They were all older, being really sweet, showing him how to climb on different parts of the playground, and he wanted it all to keep going when it was time for us to leave. As we got back in our car, Charlie voiced a request: "I want more people." That's because he knows that getting a brother or a sister, whether they share our DNA or not, is a precious gift.

And so Paul goes for the full ask, having talked of how Philemon has refreshed the hearts of the saints in his local congregation (verse 7) and having called Onesimus his own heart (verse 12), he asks for Philemon to refresh that heart. Onesimus, who

is no longer Philemon's slave, is now his brother. Paul is confident that Philemon will do even more than Paul has asked.

Paul then reframes accountability in light of the Kingdom. In Christ, accountability is embodied. We are accountable not to some arbitrary standard or checklist of achievements, but to one another. Some may read Philemon from our 21st century vantage point and be dissatisfied that Paul does not go far enough in advocating for the release of Onesimus. But I think it is important to note that immediately after implying that Philemon will go above and beyond what Paul has asked, Paul tells Philemon that he is coming to stay with him soon. Verse 22: "At the same time, prepare a guest room for me, for I am hoping that through your prayers I will be graciously given to you." So if Onesimus is not received well, if he is mistreated and continues as a slave, do we think that Paul isn't going to find out about it?

Living a life where we daily take up our cross and follow Jesus is difficult. We need one another's support and encouragement as we walk the path together. Paul was not content to throw some words Philemon's way and wash his hands of the situation. He cared too much for Onesimus and indeed for Philemon, to leave this delicate situation to chance. They needed Paul to be relationally present and so he was.

Being in genuine relationships of accountability with one another will cost us some privacy and some pride, but if that is the cost of not walking the journey alone, we stand to gain so much more than what we stand to lose.

The path of Christian discipleship is a grueling call to greater and greater holiness, greater and greater Christ-likeness. It meant that Philemon had to let go of some things he felt he was entitled too. It may mean something similar for you, but the reframe is worth it. For the way of the cross is the way of life.

So consider the cost today. The cruciform life changes what we deem to be praiseworthy, it changes how we view and interact with others, it changes our systems of accountability, all in ways that will at times feel like burdens. But just like that field that has a treasure buried in it, just like that pearl that the merchant sells everything for, the way of the Kingdom is truly what we are looking for.