

A Beloved Sibling  
Philemon 1:16

Sunday, March 14, 2021 at The First Congregational Church of Marshalltown,  
Iowa.

➤ *Introduction: Judges 19: One of the Darkest Episodes of Scripture*

One of the darkest stories of slavery, as I see it, is found in the Book of Judges (chapter 19). A woman is attacked by a group of men and left for dead. Her "husband", if I can call him that, takes a cavalier attitude to the attack until he realizes that she is indeed dead. The end result is a civil war among the tribes of Israel. You almost never hear of this part of the Bible in sermons because there is no hero, nor is there any real moral, it seems. That is, until I read an article about this passage written by a seminary professor in Detroit. She brilliantly pointed out that the reason this episode is so unsettling, so unsavory, is because it gives us a small taste of what it is like to be treated not as a human being, but as expendable property, like a slave.

➤ *Set the stage: The Apostle Paul, his friend Philemon and Onesimus the slave*

This letter is named after Philemon, a friend of the Apostle Paul's and leader of a house church and it is about a slave named Onesimus (some scholars think that he may be an employee, but the word used often refers to a slave). Onesimus, for whatever reason, has met with Paul and become a convert to Christianity. Paul sends him back with the request that he be allowed to return and help Paul, now aged and imprisoned. He reminds Philemon that Onesimus is now a brother in Christ and that it is very hard to see someone as a brother and yet treat them as property. We know from other writings of Paul that he advised slaves to seek the Lord for their joy and contentment but pursue freedom if they could. We also know that Onesimus was in fact released by Philemon to serve Paul. We also know that Paul would have been influenced by the Hebrew Scriptures that clearly state that an escaped slave is to be helped, not returned to their masters in chains. (1 Corinthians 7:21; Colossians 4:9; Deuteronomy 23:15)

➤ *We are Free in Christ Yet We are Slaves*

It is safe to say, I think, that the Bible is greatly in favor of human freedom, both political and spiritual. Furthermore, the first type of freedom seems to be

based on the second. That is, people who are spiritually free are more likely to move toward being politically, legally free, and to value that freedom for all people. We cannot, therefore, be accepting of the idea that there are people who are slaves, treated as expendable property, in this country today. It cannot be tolerated, but I think to find the strength to stand for political freedom, we need to tap into the spiritual freedom that is its roots.

Galatians 4:7 says, "therefore you are no longer a slave but a son, and if a son, then an heir of God through Christ" but the same writer refers to himself as a "bondservant" three times (Romans 1:1; Galatians 1:10; Titus 1:1). Epaphras, a friend of the Apostle Paul's, is called a bondservant. Peter, James, Jude and even the Lord Jesus are all called "bondservants" (2 Peter 1:1, James 1:1; Jude 1:1; Philippians 2:7). A bondservant is a slave who would rather be a slave than be free. He is a slave by choice. When Jesus lived on this earth, though He was co-equal with the Father, He chose to be a slave of God while He lived on earth. The early Christians referred to themselves as slaves of Jesus Christ. It points to a different definition of freedom. People, like me, commonly think of freedom as the ability to do and live as we please, allowing that we do not violate another person's right to live and do as they please. There is some validity to that, but the Scriptures point to a different definition of freedom for the Christian. For us, freedom is not the ability to do as we please, it is the ability to serve the Lord Jesus. The Bible indicates that spiritually, the ability to do as we please will lead to destruction and death. Twice in Proverbs (14:12; 16:25) are the words "there is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death." For us to be used by the Lord to work for freedom, politically and legally for us and others, we need to embrace that the deepest freedom is slavery to Christ.

➤ **Conclusion: Slavery is Terrible, but to Truly Be Free We Need to Be Slaves**

The Bible depicts slavery as a terrible condition and a terrible wrong, though it has been part of the human condition for centuries on end. The New Testament book called "Philemon" is a testament to freedom and that Christ is the great freedom-giver. Ironically, we discover that for us to be truly free we have to be spiritually free, and the way to be spiritually free is to be a slave to Christ.