

So glorify God in your body

A Sermon for the Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Philemon 1:1-21; Luke 14:25-33

What does it mean to be practical? Realistic? Use common sense in the Christian life? The example given us today is slavery. If you look it up, you find out that there are about 40 million slaves today. We tend to have a Hollywood view of slavery as something long gone. Hollywood doesn't tell us that there are more slaves today, even accounting for the increase in population, than in the early centuries. (Hollywood also doesn't tell us that more Christians have died for their faith in the past hundred years than in all the years before that.)

When we talk about slavery today, we're talking about people being owned by others. This includes prostitution. Basically there are about 40 million people today who are owned by somebody else and forced by them to do whatever they want. To be sure, there are degrees of this. There are some who treat their slaves nicely, who are benevolent. Yet they still own and control others. That's still slavery. And there are many who are very brutal to their slaves.

You may say, 40 million? That just can't be. And yet remember that it was only in 1807 in England when slavery was abolished in the British Commonwealth. Abolishing slavery is that recent. That was because of a great Methodist preacher, Wilberforce. You may have seen the movie, *Amazing Grace* (2006), about him.

Brazil abolished slavery in 1880, but even today in Brazil farm workers and others like them are being rescued from slavery. A recent news story reported that one group of 44 farm workers and another group of 51 had been rescued. One report noted that in 2010 5,000 were rescued from slavery in Brazil.

When the Muslims gave up the Siege of Vienna in 1683, as they retreated, they took over two million white Christian slaves. That was only three hundred and forty years ago. Between 1530 and 1780 there were between one million and a million and a quarter white Christian slaves in that area which we today call Libya, Algeria, and Tunisia.

It was only in 1948 that the United Nations issued the Declaration of Human Rights abolishing slavery. But only two-thirds of the members of the United Nations have signed on. Those who have not signed on are mostly Muslim nations. There is still a huge problem of slavery in many parts of the world today.

What was it like in Biblical times? Slavery was an ordinary part of life, just as much as wearing clothes during the day. In the Old Testament they tried to establish some rules so slavery was not just arbitrary. In the New Testament, in Colossians 4:1 and Ephesians 5:21-6:9 it says husbands and wives are to get along, children and parents are get along, slaves and masters are to get along.

In Philemon Paul does not say abolish slavery. He says treat Philemon fairly, and treat him as one of mine (Philemon 1:10). Nevertheless, he does not try to abolish slavery. In 1 Cor 7:20-40 Paul writes: "Everyone should remain in the state in which he was called. Were you a slave when called? Never mind. . . ." Why does he say that? Because he understood the end was near. There wasn't time to mess around with lesser things (Compare 1 Thessalonians 4:15-17).

Remember how in the famous text in Galatians 3:28: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female." Paul is not trying to establish a social program. Nor is he saying that when you're a Christian, you're no longer male or female. He's saying that when we're baptized, there's a new creation in which we're taken away from sin.

He doesn't have a social program. Why not? First, he doesn't because as it says in John 19:30: "It is finished." Christ has done it all.

In the second place, the end is near. The end is always near to us. Therefore what is your perspective on what is happening. What do you do?

Proverbs 9:10 says: "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom." What is it to be a smart Christian? The fear of the Lord is the beginning of being smart.

In Luke 14 it says family doesn't come first. This is contrary to the common wisdom of today, which says that family always comes first. No, Luke 14:25 and following states family doesn't come first. After a couple of verses on that, Paul writes: "One must hate even his own life," and "whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me, cannot be my disciple." That combination of themes is found seventeen to nineteen times in the Gospels. Again and again. He who loses his life will find it. Take up your cross.

Then come two famous illustrations. So count the cost. Calculate. Reckon. Think. You're going to build something and you have to figure out if you have the money to do it. Otherwise you end up with a foundation, some wood, and you're done. People will just laugh at you.

Or if you're in a battle and you have 10,000 soldiers but the enemy has 20,000. You quickly figure out a way to negotiate a settlement. Otherwise it's foolishness. It's a matter of thinking. Calculating. And that's why Proverbs 9:10 is appropriate. Remember the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.

Then Paul also writes in 1 Cor 4:10, we are called upon to be fools for Christ. There are several places in the New Testament where it is said: "If you're going to be my disciple, sell all that you have, give it to the poor and follow me." It's another way of saying: "Take up your cross . . . He who loses his life will find it." Then it says if someone hits you on one side of your head, let him hit you on the other side. Families don't come first. Turn the other cheek. How does this work practically?

We say: That's true but we have to live. There are all kinds of ways of rationalizing. Let's not be too religious. Let's be practical. What's realistic? And so forth. When we come down to it, if we were going to follow it, if we give all to the poor, how would we feed our families? If we turn the other cheek, what about self-defense? When you come down to it, we're against slavery, but slavery is still alive and well and nobody is really going after it.

What do we say? First of all, let's look at some basic examples. We know about Bonhoeffer at the time of Nazi Germany. He was very determined to be a Christian pacifist. He coined the phrase: You can't have cheap grace. And yet, when it came down to it, he took up arms to kill Hitler. That, after all, is not turning the other cheek or loving your enemy. But it is restraining evil.

Look at Martin Luther. He was not a revolutionary. He did not have a social program because not only did he know that all our sins are forgiven in Jesus Christ already, but he held that the end was near. He held that it would be in his generation. It didn't mean that he wasn't concerned about people. His wife Katrina had a terrible time because he kept inviting people into the house and giving things out the back door. She had to put a stop to that. He was also concerned not to be about building a social program, building the kingdom of God on earth. There is something more coming.

He was for what a modern Luther scholar (Heiko Oberman) called "betterment," that is: Do what is needed to hold the chaos back so we can do what's important, which is to bring the message of the Gospel.

The perspective we're called upon to have is: No, we're not called upon to build the kingdom of God. We are to keep several things in mind:

First, our sins are all forgiven totally on Calvary. That's done. In the meantime the end is near whether we're talking about near for each one of us or near for the world. We don't know. We're not here to build the kingdom of God on earth.

Second, in 1 Cor 6:28b-29 Paul writes: "You are not your own; you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body."

Third and finally, we have his forgiveness – to live as his children, here and now, and to live keeping that perspective. Amen.