

## Set Free

**Philemon 1-21**  
**August 28, 2022**

**First Presbyterian Church**  
**Pastor Dave Carlson**

Wendell Berry wrote a poem titled “The Vacation,” about a man who’s speeding down a river on a motorboat, his video camera to his eye, recording everything he sees. The poem ends like this: He showed his vacation to his camera, which pictured it, preserving it forever: the river, the trees, the sky, the light, the bow of his rushing boat behind which he stood with his camera, preserving his vacation even as he was having it, so that after he had had it, he would still have it. It would be there. With a flick of a switch, there it would be. But he would not be in it.

He would never be in it.<sup>1</sup> To be in the video of life we have to take the camera out of our hands and let the Lord show us what’s most important. In other words, we have to live in the here and now, but not the here and now as you see it. We have to live in the here and now as God sees things.

God sees things through a lens of divine wisdom, blessing and salvation, for us and for all the world. The Apostle Paul, in today’s New Testament lesson, shows us what it’s like to see things through the lens of divine wisdom, blessings and salvation. Paul is writing from prison, knowing that if he had not taken Christ into his heart he would be a free man. And not only that, but a successful and rich man, a Pharisee among Pharisees and an instrument of the powers that be – the misguided and misused earthly powers that wage war to this day against Jesus and all he stood for and embodied.

Wherever there is injustice, divisiveness and infighting, greed and jealousy, war and hate, we need to seek and trust in the guidance, blessings and provision of the Lord so that we might see things more clearly, find a faithful path forward, and take a stand against all that is wrong with this world of ours. Just like Paul stood his ground back then – even to the point of imprisonment – we must stand our ground today as followers of Christ.

Paul, in doing that – in standing his ground for Christ – Paul seems to have a funny understanding of things; he sees things differently. Paul is in prison, and yet he counts himself free in Christ, calling himself a prisoner – not of Rome – but of Christ. Paul is restricted by Rome and yet free to live in Christ. And that freedom is available to us, too. No matter how unfair things may seem, no matter how unreasonable and angry people get, no matter how tough times are you are still free to follow the Lord and trust in his guidance, blessing and provision.

It’s not easy to trust in the guidance, blessings and provision of the Lord. It’s not easy to go where the Lord leads us when the world so often leads us astray.

But that's where true freedom come from, from pleasing the Lord and steering clear of worldly temptations and misdirections.

Take for instance the well-known politician all full of himself. He's riding in a train passing by a crowd of supporters when he pulls out a \$50 bill, saying, "I'm going to throw this \$50 out the window and make somebody happy." One of his admirers suggests, "Why don't you throw out 50 \$1 bills and make 50 people happy?" At that moment, a member of the opposing party smiles and says, "Why don't you throw yourself out the window and make everybody happy." Not Good.

No. It takes a special mindset, a special worldview to live as a Christian in a world that is so misguided. And Paul shows us how to do this. First, we have to decide whose side we're on. Calling himself a prisoner of Christ, Paul has clearly made his choice. Paul would rather be a Christian in prison than a Pharisee in freedom. For Paul, that's where true freedom is – alongside Christ, wherever that may take him.

When you wake each morning, that's an opportunity to find something to remind you whose side you're on – standing with the Lord Jesus, rather than going along wherever the world takes you. If you're going to work, go to work for the Lord. If you're helping a friend, take Jesus along in your heart as your companion. If it's a day of rest, take your rest in Jesus, make it a holy rest.

We get so focused on what the world demands of us that we lose sight of what the Lord is offering us, each day. The world is one of power plays. The way of the Lord is to play with the power and freedom you have, as given to you by God. We have all of the power and freedom to see things through the lens of godly wisdom, blessing and salvation.

When Paul writes to Philemon on behalf of the runaway slave Onesimus, he's inviting Philemon to see things differently. Paul tells Philemon that his runaway slave is now truly useful to him, whereas before he was useless. Well, that's different. As the world sees things, there's nothing more useful than a servant who does your bidding, without a moment's hesitation.

And now Paul is asking Philemon to free this servant and telling him that by doing so, the servant will become even more useful. That's crazy. Once freed, Onesimus can do whatever he wants, regardless of what Philemon has to say about it.

But the truth is, when you're a Christian, the world shows up different for you than for those who live apart from Christ. We can't expect this world to make sense to us. But we know the truth. We know that those stepping over others in their climb to the top – they're not getting anywhere, not really. In the end, through their loss of basic human kindness, they end up on the bottom, as God sees things.

The point is, Paul actually lives his life as if the reality of the fullness of Christ is more real, more powerful than what passes for reality here on earth – all the craziness we see and hear and experience.

What would it look like for you to challenge the ways of the world? I mean, we do it all the time. Whenever we give without expecting anything in return.... Whenever we forgive the unforgivable.... Whenever we trust the untrustworthy, we're challenging the ways of the world.

It's like recently when a guy from the neighborhood named Sean showed up at the church. I've helped Sean before with gas for his truck. I've talked with him enough to believe he's probably an OK guy doing the best he can. Well this day, he came asking for help with gas, again, but not for his truck. He said someone stole his truck and set it on fire before abandoning it. So, what he needed was gas for the generator that cools the motor home he is living in; and he didn't have any money. Well, it was late in the day and had to get home. So I gave him some cash – which I never do – and told him to bring me a receipt, which he said he would. Well, you guessed it. No receipt. Now, was I taken? I don't know. The ways of the world tell me I was taken. But the way of Christ tells me I helped a brother in need.

The point is, we get to choose how we want to see the world. We can see things through the lens of lying, cheating, and getting over on others. Or we can see things through the lens of brotherly love.

Paul sees things through the lens of brotherly love. And he makes his everyday decisions based on that worldview. For Paul, that's the reality he's living into. What reality are we living into? The good news is we get to choose. And our faith tells us that the choices we make matter. They matter for us, and they matter for this world we live in. So, let us all choose to live in Christ – to see things through the lens of divine guidance, blessing and provision – no matter what anyone else may choose, no matter how the world sees things, no matter how crazy this world is. Amen.

## Pastoral Prayer

O God, we thank you that you have called us your children. We are thankful for your provision, your guidance and your unending love for us.

As your children, help us to follow your lead. Keep us from thinking we can live in our own power and strength.

Just as children depend on their parents for food and shelter, let us depend on you for all that we need. You know us better than we know ourselves. Let us rest in that truth and live in the joy of being the children of God.

We pray, O God, for your children in need of your comforting presence and healing touch.

We pray all this in the name of our Lord and Savior, Jesus the Christ, saying:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.**

**Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.**

**Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.**

**For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.**