Lownes Free Church Sunday Morning – November 18, 2018

The Book of Philemon

Battleground for the Clash of Kingdoms

***Part Two: Christ and Culture***

Last week we noted that the Kingdom of God already has come with the appearance of King Jesus. But we saw that the first order of business was not destroying evil armies and dethroning rebellious kings, but subduing hearts. Jesus has brought the New Covenant, enacting it with His own blood, a Covenant which transforms us from the inside out, placing God’s law in our hearts rather than formal legislation. Jeremiah 31:3-34

In this book, Philemon is not commanded to free his slaves, and Onesimus is not instructed to lead his fellow-slaves in an insurrection against their masters. Rather, Jesus is now IN Philemon and IN Onesimus as a righteous, transformational power Who recasts their relationship in terms of God’s creative image and the powerful effects of His love.

So slavery is addressed as individuals are instructed AND empowered to act in one another’s best interests. Is this a pattern of God’s acting within culture? Let’s explore God’s strategy to hasten the day when “the kingdom of this world has become the kingdom of the Lord and of His Christ, and He shall reign forever and ever.” Rev. 11:15

The ABC’s of (the elusive) “Shalom ”

A. God’s stated decrees for Creation have been opposed by an Evil One.

Genesis 3 explains how evil entered the human race.

B. God’s plan was not to block this Evil One, but to allow him access to His creatures, and even grant him temporary victories. Job 1-3

C. God’s method has been to plant subversive, righteous, elements within the cultures of this fallen, satanic-controlled world. Abraham (Canaan), Joseph (Egypt), Daniel (Babylon), Esther (Persia) and Nehemiah (Persia) all were captives and/or part of an often oppressed minority.

D. God’s people, working inside human governments and institutions, to some extent, undermine evil elements and promote good. Jer. 29; Luke 3:7-17

E. The good that God’s people accomplish is factored into the ongoing cycles of history, with varying degrees of permanence and success. Joseph’s plan, Daniel’s influence, Esther’s rescue, and Nehemiah’s wall all had dramatic, positive results which, within a few generations, disappeared.

F. The prophets record both God’s intentions to recapture His world as well as the frustrations, cries, fears, and faith of His people as His will is done. They taught that transformation was first spiritual/moral, and only then social and political. Hab. 1-3; Daniel 7-10, 13; Isaiah 1, 2, 58; Jer. 1, 7; 20

G. Messiah Jesus is the best example of how God’s strategy works. Our greatest enemy, death, was defeated by His dying. A temporary win for Satan proved to be his eternal defeat. The “weakness” of God is stronger than man, the “foolishness” of God wiser than man. 1 Cor. 1; 2 Cor. 12

H. Jesus’ followers are called to precisely the same “fate,” namely, laying down our lives for others, for the greater, eternal good, which is in DIRECT opposition to the world and its methods. Romans 8:15-19; 1 Jn. 3:16

I. Because God’s Kingdom is not of this world, His people do not use deception, oppression, and force to control others. Matthew 26:53; John 18:36, 37

J. Because of their spiritual birthright as children of God, any and every believer can live out his destiny in any setting whatsoever, Jew or gentile, male or female, slave or free. Ephesians 6:5-9; Colossians 3:18-4:1; 1 Peter 2:18-25; 1 Timothy 6:1, 2; Titus 2:9. One’s social status need never be an issue in his value or self-image, although, all things being equal, freedom is preferred to bondage. 1 Corinthians 7

K. True shalom comes through the New Covenant in the forgiveness of sins. Peace comes through the Prince of Peace, and the fruits of redemption come only WITH the Redeemer. Political and religious attempts to bring swift, radical cultural change have destroyed cultures or damaged them beyond repair. God commends obedience and order, even through evil governments. Rom. 13. Jesus proclaimed the gospel to the poor and freedom to captives (Luke 4:16-19); He did not free slaves or alleviate poverty.

L. Attempts at Utopia always fall short, and while we must strive for justice and peace for everyone, full shalom does not come in this life. In fact, Jesus tells us that as this age ends, the Evil One will have his way with God’s people and nearly be successful in conquering them. 2 Thessalonians 3

M. When Jesus returns, the Evil One and all who have followed him will be instantly destroyed by one word from Messiah. His Peace will come in a moment, and will last for eternity. 2 Thessalonians 1; Revelation 16-22

N. In the mean time, the goal of every believer and every church should be to love others as we have been loved, and treat other human beings as we want to be treated. This requires an intolerance of “owning” people.

O. We should note, too, that the biblical words for “slave” describe everything from indentured servitude to forced labor. In the TANAKH (our “Old Testament”) there was a system of “selling oneself” to another, wealthier person for the purpose of avoiding poverty. The provisions of The Law were that such servitude was both voluntary AND temporary, contracted for seven year terms with the *option* of making the arrangement permanent. Exodus 21:1-11. (The Hebrew word translated “servant” in some passages is the SAME WORD translated “slave” in others. This demonstrates that there was no fixed institution of absolute ownership of persons, but rather a way of describing relationships more like our terms, “employers and employees.”)

P. In fact, the Law of Moses expressly forbids kidnaping, especially for the purpose of enslavement. “Whoever steals a man and sells him, and anyone found in possession of him, shall be put to death.” Exodus 21:16. In other words, forced slavery is a capital offense, and applies not only to the kidnapper, but also the one who would receive the slave as property.

Q. Israelites were forbidden to send a runaway slave back to a cruel master. Deuteronomy 23:15. Apparently it was assumed that if he had run away, it was for a good reason, and the slave should be considered free to live wherever he chose. (Remember, though, that in an agrarian society, virtually everyone was tied to the land in some way, either in its ownership or being employed in working it. To be totally free likely meant free to starve. This is why parallels between biblical slavery and the kind of slavery formerly practiced in our nation are very tenuous, for the Bible can not be used to justify cruelty or absolute bondage of any kind.)

R. The New Testament includes kidnaping and enslavement in the list of vices which are excluded from God’s Kingdom (1 Timothy 1:10). Also, one of the sins which invokes God’s end-time wrath upon humanity is the buying and selling of slaves, or “souls” (Revelation 18:13).

S. The Lord often invokes the memory of Israel’s history of forced labor in Egypt as a way to remind them NOT to repeat the abuses of their harsh task-masters, and to observe Sabbath rest days for both master and servants. Deuteronomy 5:15; 16:12; 24:20-22; *etc.* Additionally, Israel was told that IF they kept God’s laws, poverty would be virtually eradicated, since there would be abundance, but that realistically, some always would be poor and should be helped, not enslaved (Deuteronomy 15:1-11).

T. So while the Bible shows that systems of servitude are normal parts of society, cruelty and absolute ownership must never be part of the equation. Leviticus 25:23-55; Deuteronomy 15:12-15; 24:14, 15.

U. Taken together, the above observations lead us back to the reality that as believers, we are citizens of two kingdoms. On the one hand, we live in a fallen human culture and on the other, we live as God’s children in His Kingdom, and are to live differently from our culture. Because of God’s love for us, we are both instructed and empowered to do all we can to treat all other humans as God’s image bearers AND to seek to win them to become followers of Jesus. Matthew 28:18-20

V. While we are part of a culture, we are not to participate in its evils. Just as Joseph, Daniel, Esther, and Nehemiah followed God and were able to make a difference within evil governments while serving unbelieving kings, so also can we, as God grants us influence and access. Christians who spoke out and fought against slavery in our nation are examples, as are more famous influencers such as William Wilberforce, who, along with Thomas Clarkson and others, finally convinced the English parliament to outlaw slavery and free the slaves within the British Empire in 1807.

W. This does not mean leading rebellions and plotting assassinations, but rather doing our jobs faithfully, participating in our government, and working against cruelty, abortion, human trafficking, and other ways that God’s image is being abused. Even our speech should reflect our respect for every person since he or she is made in God’s image. James 3:9-12

X. We realize that greed and abuse of economic advantage will always be issues in our world, and that with poverty often comes the loss of one’s voice and ability to help oneself. Limited access to resources necessary to “make it” in our world IS an ongoing problem. However, poverty does not equate virtue, and the same sin nature that enables greed also enables sloth and multi-generational poverty. No social or political action can eradicate these heart-based evils. Only gospel grace frees us from sin and cynicism.

Y. We must never hide behind one truth to avoid another. We must never excuse evils such as slavery on the basis of its economic advantage, legal status, or long tradition. We must never contribute to the evil in a culture, even though we are part of the culture and support it to the extent that it creates order and facilitates life. Christians throughout history have modeled this even as others have twisted selective Bible texts to justify evil.

Z. The book of Philemon helps us bridge the gap between God’s Kingdom and the kingdoms of this world which are temporarily under satanic control. Paul shows us how to exert positive, godly influence and encourage others, in liberty, to do the same, knowing that Jesus will return as Judge of all.