



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

### Reverend Giuseppe Mattei (September 7, 2025)

Before the fall of the Berlin Wall, Christians faced explicit cost in a Communist-controlled Germany. Some had to choose between being confirmed as Christians or joining the Communist Party. If they chose confirmation, it could mean not attending university or participating fully in civic life. Only a few years earlier, during an epoch controlled by fascist ideologies, Christians didn't fare any better.<sup>1</sup> During the years that led to and during WWII, most people demonstrated their Christianity and patriotism by embracing nationalism.<sup>2</sup> One can only imagine the division within families and among neighbors that both ideological systems brought. Is that what's going on in the USA in the last few years? Have people been questioning their allegiance to God alone (Acts 5:29; Exodus 20:3)?

Dr. Ellen Ott Marshall, Professor of Christian Ethics declares: "To be a Christian is to be in conflict."

**Maintaining peace at any cost is not feasible:** there is a cost anyway, to justice, to real peace that emerges from justice, and to the human soul. Maintaining the status quo is not the Christian goal. Maintaining the status quo benefits only those who are on top and certainly not those who are suffering. What would it look like if those on top considered how their freedoms and advantages are established at the expense of neighbors belonging to other ethnic groups and class, and sought equity and true justice for all people?

The apostle Paul wrote **a confidential letter** to his friend, Philemon, and to the church gathering in his home. In the letter, after the initial expressions of gratitude for the companionship in the faith, Paul brings up the subject of

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<sup>1</sup> [Christianity and Fascism: An Examination of Inherent Contradictions](#)

<sup>2</sup> [Fascism and Christianity - The Atlantic](#)

Onesimus, a runaway enslaved person and property of Philemon. Onesimus sought and found refuge in Paul and, according to the apostle, has been “very useful”.

Paul announces that he’s sending Onesimus back to Philemon and doesn’t command his friend to free his slave but to receive him as a “beloved brother” in the faith (v. 16). Paul does not challenge the wider economic system of slavery but invites Philemon to consider how the blood of Christ which we share has subverted and transformed divisive differences: **faith makes us all equal** and compels us to treat one another with such awareness: “There is no longer Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male and female. For you are all one in Christ Jesus.” (Galatians 3:28)<sup>3</sup>

The subject is delicate and embarrassing. The letter gets copied, distributed and read aloud in all Christian churches. What pressure was Philemon under to liberate Onesimus once his fellow believers heard Paul’s words! How manipulative is Paul here? Instead of claiming apostolic authority, which he possessed, he dubs himself “a slave,” that is, one with Onesimus!

Philemon is presented with a **spiritual conflict**: What will he choose? Will he remain faithful to the doctrine he has received and loyal to God or will he choose his economic interests and impress on Onesimus who is boss with a punishment he won’t forget? In other words, will he live in the spiritual schizophrenia of practicing the faith on Sunday and living by the world on Monday? Will he choose to feed his body but kill his soul?

**Discipleship**, that is following Jesus, **requires hard choices** that will bring on fear of loss and separation. Going against what we have known and grew up with will not be easy and will feel self-damaging. But not doing so, not outgrowing and renouncing them will cause greater spiritual harm.

**Discipleship costs.** It starts to cost us our greed, our self-absorbed and self-centered life.

- Then, it costs us our tendency to avoid controversy, to maintain peace at any cost.

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<sup>3</sup> Check also Colossians 3:11

- Then, we get disturbed out of our indifference and start noticing things that aren't right around us.
- Then, it costs us the “minding-our-business” attitude, and we start noticing that caring for others *is* our business.
- Then, it costs us our delicate stomach, and we start vomiting anger at the evil and cruelty we see around us.
- Then, it may cost us our status, our freedom, our friends, our family, our life.<sup>4</sup> If we follow Christ too closely, we end up stuck with him on a cross!

Discipleship costs each of us different things at different times and in different ways, all according to what we need to learn in life and what we need to renounce for our personal growth and wellbeing.

It cost Philemon economically after Paul's challenge regarding Onesimus. It cost me renunciation of patriarchy, male dominance and “clericalism,” that is clergy superiority when I came to study in this country.

You see, seminarians are at the bottom of the clergy ladder in the Catholic Church but even below them are lay catechists and nuns. When I went to seminary in Chicago, IL, I expected my professors to be old priests just as in Italy. I was totally surprised when many of my professors were women. I felt my reaction in my stomach. I had a hard time accepting that women were teaching post-graduate subjects to future priests! For many of my classes I had a woman and a nun teaching me and on top of that, I'm ashamed to say, she was Black.

Could a Black woman be more educated than a white person? Of course. But at the time, it was a shock to me. I needed to learn to let go of my sense of male chauvinism and white superiority. The facts confronted me and I needed to relinquish my ingrained privileges, my racial prejudices, my biased worldview. I had much to learn and not just academically. It caused a lot of anguish in me, but I knew I needed to hit the reset button.

I did, and I gained so much more in terms of learning from a “minority” perspective, from a black, a woman, and a nun. At the end of my academic

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<sup>4</sup> <https://dailymeditationswithmatthewfox.org/2025/09/04/prayer-and-the-body-part-four/>

studies, I chose her to be my thesis director. I learned to identify and relinquish aspects of patriarchy and privilege.

When we consider the cost of discipleship – mostly relinquishing worldly power and standing up for justice<sup>5</sup> – we might be scared of how much is required of us. But we need to consider what it would cost us if we held on to it and what we may miss out on.

**What Jesus has to say in today's gospel is difficult to take in:** discipleship is costly. Was there anyone in the crowd who heard Jesus' sermon and responded with an "Amen"? I think most if not all remained stunned with their jaws hanging. Hating mother? Father? Is he serious? Given that family was the building block of the ancient world and central for survival, these words were both challenging and infuriating. Is Jesus really saying hate is a mark of discipleship?

Is what he just said an exaggeration, a hyperbole to stress the cost of discipleship? Biblical scholar Diane Chen puts it this way: "To become Jesus' follower, one's preference—loyalty, love, and priority—must reside with Jesus over all people and things one holds dear."<sup>6</sup> In other words, **Jesus is not calling people to hate others but to love God's ways more than anything else** and by doing so one automatically loves mother, father, wife and children and so on.

For Luke, to follow Jesus is to always be ready to say farewell to any person, position, possession, and, we might add, political party that compromises our allegiance to Jesus Christ. Jesus invites us to discern whether we are willing to persist and endure on the journey.

The cost of discipleship may be extremely high, but the benefits are far better than the loss it requires. We are not alone: God's grace sustains us, and God's Spirit strengthens us along the way. Jesus, after all, will always be with us until the end of the age.<sup>7</sup> Let us boldly follow him, who can give us peace beyond our wildest dreams. Amen.

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<sup>5</sup> <https://sojo.net/magazine/september-october-2025/big-brands-fuel-war-machine-gaza>

<sup>6</sup> Diane G. Chen, *Luke: A New Covenant Commentary* (Cascade, 2017), 210.

<sup>7</sup> Matthew 28:20