

Freedom for Neighbor Love | BY GERALD R. WINSLOW

For those who choose to live by the ethics of *agapē*, or neighbor love, there are varieties of freedom worth wanting.¹ According to Jesus, the second great commandment is to “Love your neighbor as yourself.”² What is the significance of free will for the capacity to follow this commandment? Given current doubts about the possibility of deliberately chosen, self-caused actions, what can reasonably be affirmed about the choice to live according to the commandment to love one's neighbor? I offer here some reflections on the relationship between human freedom and the conscious decision to abide by the Christian norm of neighbor love. The goal is an understanding of personal freedom suitable for relationships nurtured by *agapē*.

A Prismatic Story

Sometimes a story, like a prism, may open to view the beauty of nuances otherwise hidden. The brief letter of Paul, the Apostle, to a fellow believer named Philemon presents such a story. The letter is Paul's earnest appeal for Philemon to take back into his home, and his good graces, a runaway slave named Onesimus. Paul, who was a prisoner in Rome at the time of writing the letter, had somehow become acquainted with this fugitive slave. Apparently, Onesimus had escaped his master's house hundreds of miles away in Colossae and found his way to the capitol of the Empire. There he met Paul, became a Christian, and cared for Paul during his imprisonment. So beloved had Onesimus become to Paul that the Apostle refers to him as “my son”³ and “my very heart.”⁴

After customary words of greeting, Paul begins the letter by commending Philemon for his “love and faith.”⁵ Then, just before his appeal for Onesimus, Paul writes this: “I could be bold and order you to do what you ought to do, yet I appeal to you on the basis of love.”⁶ Paul indicates that he would have been pleased to keep Onesimus

by his side in order to continue benefiting from the help he would have received. Then he adds, “But I did not want to do anything without your consent, so that any favor you do will be spontaneous and *not forced*.”⁷ A couple of verses later, Paul becomes highly personal when he tells Philemon, “. . .if you consider me a partner, welcome him as you would welcome me.”⁸

The radical nature of Paul's appeal becomes most evident when he pleads for Philemon to take Onesimus back “no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother.”⁹ True, slaves in Roman times were generally considered members of the household, and some were even given major responsibilities for running the affairs of the home. But nothing like the kind of relationship Paul is prescribing would have been expected. The decision to relate to a slave as one's “dear brother” would have represented a drastic break with custom.

We have no way of knowing for certain how Philemon received Paul's plea. It seems likely that the appeal worked because the letter was preserved and entered the canon of Christian scripture, and because Onesimus is mentioned in one other letter as “our faithful and dear brother, who is one of you.”¹⁰ Whatever the historical outcome, the structure of Paul's appeal to Philemon provides some prismatic light for our chosen topic.

Reflections on Neighbor Love and Freedom

What then does the story of Onesimus teach us about the kind of love on which Paul asks Philemon to base his treatment of a returned slave?¹¹ And what has this story to say about the kind of freedom worth wanting by those who follow the way of Jesus—the way of *agapē*? Of the many that might be described, here are five essential features of such freedom.

First, human decisions matter. The story tells a truth about human volition and action that most people accept

19th century engraving of St Paul the Apostle in prison.



IMAGE SOURCE: ALAMY LTD.

intuitively; the outcome of events often depends decisively on the choices people make. Paul knows that he made a choice, and he knows it will make a difference. He could have kept Onesimus with him in Rome. But he didn't. He also knows that Philemon has a decision to make. He will either accept Paul's appeal based on love, or he won't. Paul expresses his full assurance that Philemon will do the loving thing: "Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I ask."¹² But Paul knows it could turn out otherwise. Both Paul and Philemon have power over alternative courses of action, or else the story is senseless. Indeed, the intensity of Paul's appeal is felt more strongly in the letter just because of the element of uncertainty. Only when Philemon decides whether or not to accept Paul's appeal and act on that decision, will some of the uncertainty be removed.

If such power over alternatives is entirely illusory, if the end of the story was already determined from the beginning or if it depends on chance or chaotic complexity, then, of course, the story, at most, represents strange theater. What if, through time travel, we could now subject Paul, Philemon, and Onesimus to our current neuro-diagnostic tools to find out what the *real* causes of their decisions and actions were? Would we discover that they only imagined wrongly that they were responsible for

their decisions? Would we be able to describe what *actually* instigated what they thought were their choices? Maybe. And perhaps there might emerge some new, coherent way to rescue the sense of our story and much of the rest of an ethics of responsibility. But I will try to explain why I have my doubts about what is sometimes called compatibilism—the view that a deterministic account of human action is somehow compatible with moral responsibility.

A second feature of human freedom evident in our story is that persons committed to neighbor love can overrule, to some extent, their usual inclinations. If this were not true, it would make no sense to ask Philemon no longer to treat Onesimus as a slave but as a brother. It would also be nonsensical for Jesus to teach his followers to "love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you."¹³ And every hearer or reader of the story of the Good Samaritan should understand that the one who decided to act as a "neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers" had many reasons to skip the acts of mercy. The principle of *agapē* and the stories to which it gives rise are filled with examples of choosing to override strong inclinations or habits for the sake of neighbor love.

This does not mean, however, that human freedom, of the sort worth wanting and worthy of our belief, is exempt from all kinds of influences, both internal and external to the one

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who decides. In the case of our prismatic story, Paul uses his leadership role in the church and his special friendship with Philemon to influence Philemon's decision to the fullest extent, short of coercion. Does such influence mean that Philemon is less free in the morally relevant sense? One way to reduce freedom of the will to absurdity is to imagine that a free choice requires a fully conscious, fully rational decision maker to be presented with equally attractive alternatives, and that no concealed influences be at work. But Philemon, like the rest of us, is the sum of his emotions and his reasons, his beliefs and his doubts, his culture and his faith, and innumerable other factors that will affect his decision, including the influence of the Apostle. The freedom needed for neighbor love could not possibly be an abstract metaphysical concept, stripped of connection with life's experiences. The Christian scripture says, "We love because [God] first loved us."¹⁴ So freedom for neighbor love is centrally influenced for Christian believers by their experience of God's love as expressed in the ministry of Jesus. Such freedom is also exercised within the formative influence of the community of faith. The individualism of later "I-did-it-my-way" culture is foreign to the founding faith of Christians who could think of the church as the "body of Christ."¹⁵ Still, if Philemon, under the power of neighbor love, chooses to take Onesimus back into his home as a "brother," he will always know that he could have done otherwise. Whatever his decision, Philemon knows (and we know with him) that he is responsible.

Third, human beings have a remarkable capacity to imagine alternative futures and then select a desired one in light of personal convictions and values. Paul could imagine Onesimus staying with him in Rome, helping him during his imprisonment, and perhaps traveling with him later. But Paul could also visualize Onesimus returning to the home of his surprised master and being accepted by a gracious Philemon. According to the text, Paul even imagines being a houseguest of Philemon again, and no doubt pictures Onesimus present "no longer as a slave, but as a dear brother."

A person's worst fears and best hopes, along with the most ethically praiseworthy or blameworthy actions, are enabled by this creative ability to envision alternative choices and their consequences. Persons typically understand the sense of what is meant when the poet writes:

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth;

Then took the other...¹⁶

The road ahead always bends, of course. The mind's eye can never foresee all that will come with the choice. And the roads that diverge are never all the roads that could have been imagined, if only the imagination were not constrained by limitations imposed by temperament and culture and countless other contingencies. Presumably, Paul, for example, does not imagine that Onesimus will be a new Spartacus leading a major slave uprising against the Roman Republic.¹⁷ But Paul could imagine that the realities of Christian faith would lead in the direction of human equality: "There is neither slave nor free...for you are all one in Christ Jesus."¹⁸ A central element of religious faith is its capacity to awaken the imagination to some new alternative futures, while foreclosing others. One of the most liberating features of faith, evidenced in the story of Onesimus, is faith's ability to open counter-cultural alternatives to view and thus empower prophetic action.

Fourth, this story of the return of Onesimus shows the power of love's persuasion as opposed to the methods of coercion. Of course, from the perspective of lockstep determinism there might be little or no ethically significant difference between coercive force and choices the decision maker falsely imagines are her or his own. All would be equally determined. But our story depicts a different reality—a world in which choices made freely are identified as the way of neighbor love. Paul claims the authority to command that Philemon accept his returning slave. But Paul prefers to encourage Philemon to act voluntarily because of love. American gangster, Al Capone, purportedly said, "You can get much further with a kind word and a gun than you can with a kind word alone."¹⁹ However true this may be in the ordinary world of people seeking dominance, it is not true of the way of Jesus, who taught his followers,

You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever

wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave—just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.²⁰

Such freedom is characterized by resistance to being coerced and renunciation of using coercion as a means of causing others to make what are taken to be good and right choices. As the story of Philemon illustrates, the way of neighbor love is that of persuasion, not the way of coercion or manipulation.

Fifth, and finally, freedom for neighbor love requires that the believers take responsibility for their decisions, the actions based on those decisions, and the results of those actions. Christian thinkers, such as H. Richard Niebuhr, have described the capacity to respond to God's love and to take responsibility for one's actions as essential to the ethics of Christian faith. Instead of posing the central questions of ethics in terms of deontological duties or teleological goals, Niebuhr suggests that "we consider our life of response to action upon us with the question in mind, 'To whom or what am I responsible and in what community of interaction am I myself.'"²¹ Whatever else is said about the kind of freedom essential for Christian ethics, it must be sufficient freedom to enable the person to respond to the love of the Creator and to accept responsibility for expressing that love to other persons. Followers of Jesus affirm that they are gratefully responsible for sharing the transformational love of God they have received. Here we may benefit from quoting Philip Clayton, who describes the

features of humanity that reflect the divine nature: humanity's moral nature, its rationality, self-consciousness, responsibility to others and to the earth—and its freedom. . . . Freedom is the leitmotiv of theological anthropology, the theory of personhood: we are free to worship God; we are free to make rational and moral decisions; and we are free to turn away from God, to alter the image that was created within us.²²

The Creator who made a universe suitable for and nurtured by *agapē* is the Guarantor of the freedom needed for neighbor love. ■

Gerald Winslow, PhD, Professor of Religion, Loma Linda University.

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Footnotes:

1. Readers of Daniel Dennett will recognize that I have adapted this phrase from his *Elbow Room: The Varieties of Free Will Worth Wanting* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1984 and 2015).
2. Matthew 22:39; all biblical quotations are from the New International Version.
3. Philemon 10.
4. Philemon 12; the expression in Greek is ἐμὰ σπλάγχνα or "my bowels," a then-common reference to the seat of a person's emotions.
5. Philemon 5.
6. Philemon 8–9; the Greek ἐπιτάσσειν is "to enjoin" or "to command" instead of which Paul asks Philemon to act διὰ τὴν ἀγάπην or "because of love."
7. Philemon 12, emphasis added.
8. Philemon 17.
9. Philemon 16.
10. Colossians 4:9.
11. My understanding of *agapē* (Greek ἀγάπη) has been most influenced by Anders Nygren, *Agapē and Eros* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1953).
12. Philemon 21.
13. Matthew 5:44.
14. 1 John 4:19.
15. 1 Corinthians 12:27.
16. Robert Frost, "The Road Not Taken."
17. Spartacus (111–71 BC) was a Thracian gladiator who was one of the escaped slave leaders in the Third Servile War, a major slave revolt against the Roman Republic.
18. Galatians 3:28.
19. The attribution of these oft-quoted lines to Al Capone is apparently an erroneous bit of American folklore. Standup comedian, Irwin Corey, claims to be the source. See <http://www.mylcaponemuseum.com/id211.htm>.
20. Matthew 20:25–28.
21. H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self: An Essay in Christian Moral Philosophy* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999), 68.
22. Philip Clayton, *God and Contemporary Science* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997), 37.