

“Life and Growth in the Image of Christ” based on Philemon and Deuteronomy 30:15-20
Delivered by Pastor Drew Mangione on September 7, 2025, at Shelby Presbyterian Church

After this sermon, we will read an affirmation of faith that is drawn from the Scots Confession. We will do this one for the whole month, leading up to Heritage Sunday. This confession was written in 1560 by six ministers in just four days. The leader of this group was John Knox, a former Roman Catholic notary-priest, meaning he fulfilled a government-like function for legal documents.

When he joined the cause of the Reformation, famously, he became known as a bodyguard, carrying his large sword, a Scottish claymore. Now I’m told my predecessor Luke had a replica one he would bring out. I do not own a sword, so don’t worry.

Now, 1860 was a very different time in human history when you compare it to today. You wouldn’t expect to see me up here brandishing a weapon. Violence and warfare and the assassination of opponents, unfortunately, was rather commonplace. I do not say this to excuse or minimize the horror of it. But I say this because this is the challenge we face in our history of the faith. Times have changed – and I’d argue they’ve largely improved, primarily due to the progressive nature of the Christian faith.

Now I’m not using the term “progressive” as a political term here. American politics are not in the bible. What I mean is that the summary of the law given by Jesus – love God and love neighbor – has driven a lot of change over these last 2,000 years. Some of this change has meant negotiating with the bible to move past what it says and follow the lead of the Holy Spirit to better fulfill the Spirit of this law to love God and love neighbor.

In John’s gospel, Jesus talks about just this thing. He is telling his disciples about the Holy Spirit, saying, “I have much more to say to you, more than you can bear, but when the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you in all truth.”

The Holy Spirit was then, and is now, always testifying to Jesus in the church today. So, as the world changes, we must recognize God is at work in the world to transform us. This is so that as we progress in our understanding of what we are able to bear, we can then better reflect the law as loving God and loving our neighbors. There is no better example of this than slavery itself.

Christians have negotiated with the bible over two millennia regarding this topic. It’s something I believe has been largely guided by the Holy Spirit, granted it has had ups and downs. I say this because if you really take the bible at face value, slavery is allowed. It’s even condoned. Yet, we recognize it as sinful and wrong because it violates the spirit of the law, which is to love God and love our neighbors.

In the ancient world, slavery was simply a fact of life, seen almost as an unavoidable necessity. In scripture and in the broader ancient world, we find both indentured and chattel slavery. Many apologists will try to soften this and claim that slavery in the bible was just indentured servitude.

Unfortunately, some of the laws explicitly refer to the enslaved people as property. It’s too common to ignore. The law furthers this point when the punishments for injuring or killing an enslaved person, are less severe than they would be for hurting an Israelite. So yes, we do need to give credit

to scripture's laws, which were considerably less harsh compared to Rome, but looking back, we can see clearly, that this was still not enough.

Shortly after Christianity was made legal in the Roman Empire in the fourth century, there was a great theologian named Gregory of Nyssa. He urged Christians saying to them that you have all this new political power, so once and for all end the practice of slavery. It is against the will of God. Quoting him, he said, "You make laws opposed to God and contrary to His natural law. For you have subjected one who was made precisely to be lord of the earth, and whom the Creator intended to be a ruler, to the yoke of slavery, in resistance to and rejection of His divine precept." The problem was that even then, the culture could not bear it.

Even his older brother Basil, who agreed with him that slavery was generally evil, also believed that with no social safety net, the end of slavery was, unfortunately, impossible. For context, Basil essentially invented the hospital system to care for the poor. He preached that owning two coats was equal to theft in God's eyes, because if you have two coats and someone else has none, then you are stealing from that person.

So, both Gregory and Basil were huge voices in the church, helping to give language to the nature of Jesus, and the Trinity, as well as what it means to choose God as the source of life, rather than choosing sin and death.

Yet, when it came to the issue of slavery, Basil argued that the first order would have to be changing hearts. He argued that simply freeing everyone to fend for themselves in the open market at that time would have resulted in death for most of the people who had been enslaved. And so, he said, the focus should be on reforming the people who owned enslaved people and getting them to recognize the equality before God of all persons through fair or even beneficial treatment.

Unfortunately, neither one got their way, and things got much worse over the next 500 to 1,000 years. The rise of Islam and its military success pushed much of Christianity north and west into Europe. In the 11th Century, for the first time, the idea of race suddenly appeared. Western Christians suddenly saw themselves as distinct from Arab and African Muslims.

So, by the 15th Century, now there was a new business, and Portugal started the African slave trade. The discovery of the new world expanded it and European Christians decided that they were going to do chattel slavery and they were going to be more like Rome than the Hebrew bible.

Yet, they claimed to be adhering to the bible when they negotiated support for slavery. They used proof texts that allowed for slavery and ignored the ones that prohibited it. They ignored how the law progressed from what is handed down in Exodus compared to what is handed down in Deuteronomy which is kinder and gentler. They ignored what we found when we read this letter to Philemon, each turn reducing its violence. Instead, Philemon was turned into the "Pauline mandate."

You see, rather than seeing the more obvious point that Paul is urging that Onesimus be seen as equal and as family, they instead claimed Paul overturned the command in Deuteronomy to not to return an enslaved person who flees their owner and instead required returning people. This was required as a measure to prevent abuse and retribution.

Now, I wish Paul had just come out and said, “Free Onesimus. I wish Paul and Jesus had made explicit statements against slavery. I wish Gregory had won his brother Basil over, and that the two of them would have ended this practice in the fourth century. I wish the fear of Islam and misguided attempts to “protect the church” had not led us to invent a social construct we now know as race and racism. But, unfortunately, that is not our history.

I lament this – and I don’t just mean I’m sad. I mean I am angry with God for all of this. You see, I wish God had just forced us to be able to bear it and ended slavery outright. God, I believe you are all powerful. I grieve that you still do not step in right now and end the vestiges of this horrible practice that still exist today. Yes, even though I believe scripture widely prohibits our anger, the one place it creates a lot of leeway for it is our anger with God.

Many a Psalm and a whole book of Lamentations, practically, teach us to direct our anger away from one another and toward God when we’re frustrated by situations like this. God can handle it because when we do this, we are still turning toward God. We are turning toward the one who pursues us with love and forgiveness.

I fully say that this is not the history I think we should have in our scripture, our faith, and our church, or our nation. But I also know that in those scriptures, in our faith, and in the church, we know that God did not turn from us. God entered into our humanity. In Jesus, God lived in our limits and showed us how to choose life, as we see in our Deuteronomy passage. The Word of God in our flesh pushed back against the powers of sin and death. He healed the sick. He forgave the sinners. He reconciled us to God. He accepted all that sin and death could muster to try to silence him and he died the death of an enslaved person, being hanged naked on the cross to die a shameful death for us and for our sake.

As much as I wish a distant God would just wave a wand and fix our world right away, our faith forces us to wrestle – that’s what Israel means, “wrestles with God.” Our faith is to wrestle with a God who works with, in, and through humanity. Our God is not distant, but, as I said, entered into our flesh even to the point of death. Jesus came to live in total solidarity with us, to be fully God and fully human, all at once. Again, this is not a math problem, it is our faith that he was fully God and fully human at the same time.

In Jesus, God chose life as one of us, to conquer death once and for all. By his resurrection, we see that death and sin are powerless, and that in Jesus, God in our humanity reigns as our King, empowering us to become adopted children of God. This is done first with the downpayment of the Holy Spirit of God, making us temples by being in and among us.

The Spirit is here to help us every day to empower us to join what God is doing in the work of reconciliation. This is so that all of creation will be made right with God not by our efforts, but by God’s love at work within us. We will continue to make many mistakes. We will continue to commit many sins, but Jesus is God’s grace. He is the gift we do not deserve. He is life and Paul in this letter demonstrates this.

No, he never explicitly recount the gospel of Jesus as he does in his other writings, but he demonstrates it in how he handles Philemon and how Paul recognizes Onesimus as his own equal.

Notice, Paul does not use his prerogative as the founder of Philemon's church Colossae, to justify his keeping Onesimus as his own free companion with him in Rome's prison.

But instead, he sends him back challenging Philemon to practice what he preaches – to love God and to love neighbor. Paul uses the verb from which we get the title of “advocate” for the Spirit, *‘parakaleo,’* in saying he “advocates” or “calls out” or “exhorts” to Philemon, for the sake of love and for the sake of Onesimus.

Paul is not a prophet. He is not directly speaking words from God through him like Isaiah and the other prophets. Instead, he is a theologian and philosopher whose words have become for us scripture because they reveal for us how to live like Jesus, who is the true Word of God, embodied in our flesh to live and die for our sake.

It's unclear if there is any debt that Onesimus actually owes Philemon, apart from his running away. But it seems Paul is saying, “If you have reason to justify anything, yes, anything contrary to receiving Onesimus as an equal, then guess what, charge it to my account since you owe me more.” It's kind of what God does in Christ when we are justified not by what we do, but what Jesus has done. So if we've got anything we think God owes us, then trust me, we owe God more and God still loves us and welcomes us and accepts us. We do not have to earn our way to God.

Sisters and brothers, we are surrounded by sinners in this room and in this pulpit. We live in a world that wants us to live like Romans doing whatever we please based on whatever status we think we have, and yet also speak like prophets, crying out against those whom we disagree with, whom we want to exclude. Those things don't go together.

We may think like the rich young ruler that we obey the commands of God, simply because we do not shun our parents, or murder people, or commit adultery, or steal, or worship other gods. We believe that in doing so we are choosing life, but we lie if we say we have no sins and if we do that, we make God into a liar.

The truth instead is that Paul in this letter demonstrates a different kind of Pauline mandate. It is not a mandate to return an enslaved person, but it is how to call out sin with love and a whole bunch of guilt. There is a lot of sin and death in our past, present, and in our future to confess, whether individually, as a church, as a nation, and as a modern culture. But there is also Holy Spirit living in and among us guiding our progress toward something better.

The Spirit guides us in striving toward the law of loving God and loving our neighbors. And so, I urge us not to be biblical in the sense of finding prooftexts for what we already think. I urge us to be biblical in the sense of being Christ-like.

I opened with a note of history – both the good of the reformation and the bad violence of it. And so, I want to close on a note of history as well – the history of Shelby Presbyterian Church. You know, I think we could probably get on our high horse and condemn the founders of our church in 1858 and say, “haha, some of you owned slaves.” But progress guided by the Holy Spirit is slow, but present even back then.

The Spirit was transforming hearts here when our church made what looks to us like a small donation of \$2, but probably was worth a lot more, maybe \$200 or something more significant to

a cause help recently freed enslaved people – their black neighbors – in 1883. It's not much, but it demonstrates the movement toward loving God and loving neighbors,

Then almost 80 years later in 1960, and four years before the American laws would require them to do so, our church made a statement that we were going to refuse to segregate our meeting house and instead welcome people of color to be seated in and among everybody else. Again, it's a small step and sure, I would have liked it to have been that way in 1858, but you know what, it's the movement of the Holy Spirit progressing us and making things better.

Last year, we approved our churchwide antiracism policy, expressly stating our belief that the gospel unites people calling us to welcome, accept and include all people. The Spirit is at work in and among us here.

Finally, this is what it means to think biblically so that we can choose life over death. Indeed, you are loved by God unconditionally with a never-ending love, just as the people of Israel were, and just as every image bearer in this world also is today. The Spirit of God is poured out at Pentecost upon all flesh, but still, many choose death. Many do so, even trying to use scripture to justify their actions.

I want you to know that you are called to know God's love for you. You are called to know that even while we lament some things, we can continue to turn to God. We can continue to open ourselves first to the transformation of the Holy Spirit so that we can choose life and grow in our love of God and love of our neighbors. In this, the Holy Spirit empowers us to grow and to change.

At the same time, we must remember that we must always be rooted in the bible, but striving to be Christ like more and more, each and every day, and in every way. Amen.

Fresh translation of Deuteronomy 30:15-20: Consider this: I have given before you this day both life and what is good, along with death and what is bad. To that end, I command you today to love the Lord your God, to walk in his path, and keep his commandments, statutes, and judgements, so that you may live and become numerous. The Lord your God will bless you in the land which you enter to possess.

However, if your heart and mind turn away, so that you do not obey, and if you are drawn away and you bow to other gods and serve them, I declare to you this day that surely you shall perish. You will not be made to prolong your days in the land which you crossed the Jordan to enter and possess. I will cause heaven and earth to witness against you this day.

I have given life and death before you, blessing and cursing. So, you are to choose life, in order that you and your descendants will both live to love the Lord your God. Choose to hear his voice. Choose to cling to him because he is your life and the length of your days. This is so that you may dwell in the land which the Lord promised to give to your ancestors Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

Fresh translation of Philemon: Paul, a captive of the Messiah Jesus, and Timothy, our brother, to Philemon, the beloved who is also our fellow worker, and to our sister Apphia, and to Archippus, our fellow collaborator, and to your house church: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus the Messiah.

I thank my God always when I recall you in my prayers, hearing of your love and the faith that you have before the Lord Jesus and among all the holy, so that your common life might become effective in the full knowledge

of every good thing that is in us, in Christ. For I have great joy and encouragement from your love because the hearts of the holy have been revived by you, brother.

Therefore, I have great boldness in Christ to compel you to do what is proper. On account of love, I would rather advocate to you this way being now Paul, an old man, who is also a captive of the Messiah Jesus. I advocate to you for my child, Onesimus, whom I have fathered in this imprisonment. He, who was once useless to you, is now useful to both you and to me I have sent him back to you in person. It is he who is my very heart, whom I wanted to keep with myself, in order that on behalf of you, he might serve me in this captivity for the gospel.

However, I intend to do no such thing apart from your knowledge. This way by not constraining you, it will be for your good and according to your free will. Perhaps it was for this reason that he was apart from you for a time, in order that you might have him in full for eternity, no longer as one enslaved, but greater than one enslaved, as a beloved brother.

He is this especially to me, yet so much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord. Therefore, if you consider me a companion, receive him just as you would me. However, if in any way he has been unjust to you, or he is indebted to you, charge this to me. I, Paul, did write this with my own hand. I will repay it, so that I might not have to mention that you owe me even yourself. Yes, brother, it is possible I might benefit from you in the Lord. Revive my heart in the Messiah.

Being confident in your listening, I write to you, knowing that you will do even beyond what I say. Now, at the same time, prepare a place for me to stay. For I hope that on account of your prayers, I will be granted by grace to you. Epaphras, my fellow captive of the Messiah Jesus, greets you, as do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke, my fellow workers. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your Spirit. Amen.