

**COMMENTARY ON READINGS FOR SEPT. 5, 2004
(Twenty-Third Sunday in Ordinary Time)**

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Our readings today are “sapiential” in tone, that is, they are in the nature of wisdom literature. They call us to reflect about our life. The reading from the Book of Wisdom sighs with the weariness that life can cause for us at times, and concludes that without the Holy Spirit of God, who alone bestows wisdom and useful knowledge, human beings cannot do or know anything worthwhile. The psalm is in the same spirit, as it prays for respite after hard toil.

The letter to Philemon reflects a practical application of the gospel passage, which is a development of the attitude found in the first reading. Jesus calls his listeners to complete detachment for the sake of the Kingdom, or what is the same thing, in order to follow in Jesus’ footsteps. This call, however, demands reflection: one must be aware of its tremendous demands, which allow for no “if, ands or buts” or halfway measures. The punch line is peculiarly Luke’s: following Jesus demands renouncing all possessions. Luke shows a particular concern for the poor and the outcast, and can view the relationship between riches and poverty in harsh terms (see Luke 1:53; 6:20, 24; 16:14, 25). There can be no impediment to the Kingdom, and wealth is usually the biggest obstacle (see also Luke 16:13).

Paul, in prison, writes to Philemon, the owner of a run-away slave (named Onesimus, which means “useful”!), sending the slave back to his owner, even though Onesimus had become very useful to Paul, indeed like a son. Paul reminds Philemon, whom he had led to the faith, that Philemon owes Paul his spiritual life in the Lord. But without demanding that Philemon give up his property (the slave Onesimus), Paul does ask that Philemon take back Onesimus as a brother, not as a mere possession, at the same time calling Philemon to partnership instead of superiority. Here we have a practical, real-life, application of Jesus’ Gospel message.