

6.21.20

The Gift of Reconciliation

Philemon 1.1-25

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As I was preparing this sermon, the thought occurred to me, can you imagine if the Apostle Paul had a cell phone how many calls & text messages he would have sent to his wide circle of associates & friends? After Paul had established churches during his missionary journeys, he continued to oversee the spiritual growth of the new congregations either by visiting them or by writing letters to them or both. In most of his letters the main part is divided into two sections, the first deals with doctrine or theology & the second dealing with practical problems facing the church. Paul dictated his letters to someone else who did the actual writing.

To me the current arrangement of Paul's letters in the New Testament was an unfortunate choice – they're arranged from longest (Romans) to shortest (Philemon). I think it would be more helpful and revealing if Paul's letters in the New Testament were listed as best as can be determined in the order in which they were written. That way we could see more easily the development of his thinking over the 12-15 years in which the letters that are preserved were written. The first letter Paul wrote to the church at **Thessalonica** deals primarily with how Christians are to live in the present day while anticipating the **second coming of Christ and the end of the age**. A few years later during his third missionary journey, Paul sent four of his most important letters to the churches in **Galatia, Corinth, and Rome**, these deal with several topics including the fruit of the Spirit and spiritual gifts, but mostly with **the way of salvation**. Several years later while under house arrest in Rome, Paul wrote letters to Christians in **Ephesus, Colossae** (kuh-lahs'ay), **and Philippi** dealing with **the person & work of Jesus & how we're to follow his example**. At this time, he wrote a brief personal note to Philemon.¹

Paul's letter to Philemon (fī-lee'muhn) is the last of Paul's letters as they are presented in the New Testament. With only 25 verses in English from the 335 words in the Greek original, **Philemon is the shortest of Paul's writings**. The Letter to Philemon is addressed to specific persons. **It's a letter of mediation seeking to foster**

¹ Bruce M. Metzgar, *The New Testament: It's Background, Growth & Content* (3rd edition, Abingdon, Nashville, 2003), page 252. The Letter to Philemon is one of the seven letters that almost all biblical scholars believe were written by the apostle Paul, the others are 1 Thessalonians, Galatians, 1 & 2 Corinthians, Romans, & Philippians.

reconciliation between two individuals who are both connected to Paul & view him as their spiritual leader. **Philemon**, a slave owner, & **Onesimus**, a slave who fled Philemon's household but who, after time with Paul, returned, wishing to have a new and different type of relationship. **The Letter to Philemon is Paul's plea for a renewed relationship between the two, but one on better terms than before considering their mutual faith in Christ. The central meaning of the letter concerns the difference the transforming power of the gospel can make in the lives and relationships of believers to bring about reconciliation, regardless of class or other distinctions or divisions.**

“Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, & Timothy our brother,
To Philemon our **dear friend & co-worker**, to Apphia (af'ee-uh) our sister,
 to Archippus our fellow soldier, & to the church in your house:
Grace to you & **peace** from God our Father & the Lord Jesus Christ.

When I remember you(e) in my prayers, I always thank my God because I hear of **your love** for all the saints & **your faith** toward the Lord Jesus. I pray that the sharing of **your faith** may become effective **when you perceive all the good that we may do for Christ**. I have indeed received much **joy & encouragement** from **your love**, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you, **my brother**.

For this reason, **though** I am bold enough in Christ **to command you** to do your duty, **yet I would rather appeal to you on the basis of love**—& I, Paul, do this as an old man, & now also as a prisoner of Christ Jesus.^g I am appealing to you for **my child, Onesimus**, whose father I have become during my imprisonment. Formerly he was **useless** to you, but now he is indeed **useful**^h both to you & to me. I am sending him, that is, **my own heart**, back to you. I wanted to keep him with me, so that he might be of service to me in your place during my imprisonment for the gospel!; but I preferred to do nothing without your consent, in order **that your good deed might be voluntary & not something forced**. Perhaps this is the reason he was separated from you for a while, so that **you might have him back forever, no longer as a slave but more than**

e **From verse 4 through verse 21, you is singular**

g *Or as an ambassador of Christ Jesus, and now also his prisoner*

h The name **Onesimus** means *useful* or (compare verse 20) *beneficial*

a slave, a **beloved brother**—especially to me but how much more to you, both in the flesh & in the Lord.

So if you consider me your partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. If he has wronged you in any way, or **owes** you anything, charge that to **my account**. I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand: I will **repay** it. I say nothing about **your owing me** even your own self. Yes, brother, let me have this **benefit** from you in the Lord! Refresh my heart in Christ. Confident of your obedience, I am writing to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say.

One thing more—prepare a guest room for me, for I am hoping through your prayers to be restored to you. Epaphras (ep'uh-fras), my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends greetings to you,ⁱ & so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, & Luke, my fellow workers.

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.”

One of the great themes that runs through the Bible from beginning to end is the theme of **Reconciliation**. From the beginning in Genesis God is seeking to be reconciled with people & trying to help people be reconciled to each other. From the first man & woman & their sons Cain & Abel (who were the first murderer & the first murder victim) to the story of the brothers Jacob & Esau (Genesis 33:4, 11) whose relationship was marked by deception, suspicion, & estrangement; to the story of Joseph & his eleven brothers who beat him & sold him into slavery in Egypt – Genesis is filled with stories of broken relationships & the need for forgiveness, & reconciliation.

Jesus taught about the importance of seeking reconciliation whether we have wronged someone else or someone else has wronged us (Matt. 5:23–26, 18:15). **Paul** wrote repeatedly about how in Christ’s life, death, and resurrection God has reconciled us and made us new people with a new purpose **to be God’s ambassadors of reconciliation**. (For more on Reconciliation between God & Humanity, see Leviticus 8:15; Ezekiel 45:15; Daniel 9:24; Romans 5:1, 10; 11:15; 2 Corinthians 5:18–21; Ephesians 2:15–18; & Colossians 1:20–22).

Forgiveness & Reconciliation are never easy, they can be difficult & costly, but if history & current events teach us anything, they teach us that using power to

ⁱ Here *you* is singular

coerce, force, or manipulate others to do what we want, an inability to forgive, or seeking revenge don't produce a positive result or outcome. There's also no escaping the painful truth that there can be no reconciliation unless all the parties involved want it & are willing to do the hard work that reconciliation requires. Whether in a marriage, or another family or friend relationship, it's painful when one person desires reconciliation, but the other person is unwilling to try to do the hard work to try and make things better.

In Paul's letter to Philemon, **Each of the parties involved was called to do something difficult:**

Paul must deprive himself of Onesimus's company and service.

Onesimus had to return to his master-owner, after running away.

Philemon had to forgive Onesimus and see a former slave as a beloved brother in Christ. Each of them is to do something difficult *as a Christian would do it.*

Paul – must deprive himself of Onesimus's company and service.

Paul is an older man near the end of his life & he is likely under house arrest (verses 9, 13, 23) which enabled him to provide refuge for Onesimus, who fled the household of his master, Philemon. Paul's reference to Onesimus as "*my child, whose father I have become during my imprisonment*" (v. 10) indicates Paul was the primary person who helped Onesimus become a Christian. Paul always had great joy in leading another person to Christ & he expresses he was blessed to have the benefit & usefulness of Onesimus' presence. This is a play on words as the name Onesimus literally means "*useful*" or beneficial. Paul appeals to Philemon as a friend & fellow Christian to take Onesimus back without penalty or prejudice, in view of the slave's conversion & new life in Christ, who is their common Master.

Like Paul, it can be hard for us to deprive ourselves of people who matter to us, or more likely of things we enjoy, like, & value so that reconciliation may take place. But, like love or being a part of a larger community, reconciliation often involves our need to give up something, to sacrifice something that is comforting, valuable, or meaningful to us in order for a relationship to be what it should be. If you have a relationship where reconciliation is needed a question to ask yourself is, "***What is my Onesimus? What is it that I find useful or beneficial that I may need to release and let go of for reconciliation to be possible?***"

The second key person in the letter is **Onesimus** –who Paul instructs **to return to his master after running away**. In his letter to the **Colossians** Paul writes (4:1), *“Masters, treat your slaves justly and fairly, for you know that you also have a Master in heaven.”* Then Paul refers to **Onesimus** traveling with Tychicus (tik'uh-kuhs) to the Colossian church. **Colossians 4:7-9**, *“Tychicus will tell you all the news about me; he is a beloved brother, a faithful minister, and a fellow slave in the Lord. 8 I have sent him to you for this very purpose, so that you may know how we are and that he may encourage your hearts; 9 he is coming with **Onesimus, the faithful and beloved brother, who is one of you**. They will tell you about everything here.”*

Paul has come to see Onesimus as a faithful & beloved brother, but he knows that Onesimus as a Christian must take the difficult step of returning to Philemon. We don't know what Onesimus did, if anything, whether he took something to help finance his escape, or simply stole himself away to freedom. Whatever it was, he needed to return. **This is always difficult for us to do – to humble ourselves before someone else and say contritely and truly, “I was wrong, I hurt you, and I'm deeply sorry. I want to make things right.”** Onesimus has become a faithful, beloved, trusted companion of Paul, it must have been excruciating for Onesimus to risk giving up his new life where he was treated with respect and given responsibility to risk returning to his master for an uncertain fate. When you think you can't take a step toward reconciliation remember this - since fugitive slaves were subject to severe penalty (usually burning the legs or arms with hot iron or branding the forehead), this step of reconciliation was a significant risk for Onesimus. For us, **part of reconciliation is having the courage to risk returning to the one we have hurt or wronged.**

The third person in the letter is **Philemon**, a man who was converted to Christianity by Paul (Philem. 19), probably at Ephesus. He had been associated with Paul's mission, and is described as *‘our beloved fellow worker’* (Philem. 1). Since he was able to host a congregation (Philem. 2) and prepare a guest room for Paul (Philem. 22), Philemon was likely an individual of financial means. Paul observes that Philemon was recognized as a person of faith and love toward Christ and the church. **Philemon**

o Other authorities read *that I may know how you are*

has the difficult task of **forgiving the one who has wronged him. Not only that**, but the letter that is sent to him **is sent to the whole church** that meets in his house and Paul is lovingly putting significant pressure on Philemon, he asks but doesn't command him, to forgive Onesimus, to charge any financial loss to Paul's account, and to receive Onesimus back not as a slave but as a beloved brother. Can you imagine if I included on the cover of the church newsletter the names of all the people who needed to be reconciled – who needed to give or receive forgiveness to each other? I suspect it might make many of us uncomfortable and I might have to look for another job. Yet that is exactly what Paul is doing to Philemon, he is letting the whole church know what he wants Philemon to do and the whole church will know whether Philemon responded positively to Paul's request or not.

It's an interesting exercise to think about who has the most difficult task – Paul having to lose the benefit of Onesimus, Onesimus having to return to his master to ask forgiveness and risk losing his freedom, or Philemon, who is very publicly asked to forgive a former slave and to welcome him as a brother. Perhaps our answer depends on who we relate to most in the letter. We should also mention Apphia, Philemon's wife, who is named by Paul in the beginning of the letter. She would be significantly impacted by taking Onesimus back into the household & into the church as well as by having to deal with her husband's feelings & his response. When it comes to reconciliation, the circle of people who are influenced is wider than we may realize. Reconciliation is not easy.

An elderly man was walking on a beach found a magic lamp. He picked it up, & a genie appeared. *“Because you have freed me,”* the genie said, *“I will grant you a wish.”* The man thought for a moment & then responded. *“My brother and I had a fight thirty years ago, and he hasn't spoken to me since. I wish that he'd finally forgive me.”* There was a thunderclap, and the genie declared, *“Your wish has been granted. You know, most men would have asked for wealth or fame. But you only wanted the forgiveness and love of your brother. Is it because you are old and dying?”* *“No,”* the man cried, *“but my brother is, and he's worth about \$60 million.”*²

² Bausch, World of Stories, 388-389.

Reconciliation is something that does benefit us, but our motivation isn't quite as selfish as the man in that story. One of the special places we have visited is Coventry Cathedral in England <https://www.coventrycathedral.org.uk/wpsite/our-history/> The beautiful cathedral was almost completely destroyed in November of 1940 when it was hit by bombs dropped by the German Air Force during the blitz against the Great Britain during World War Two. Workmen picking through the rubble found a large number of nails from the Middle Ages. The nails were gathered up, fashioned into crosses, & plated with silver. One cross of nails was set up on an altar in the ruins of the old cathedral. Behind it is a large cross, made from beams charred during the fire, & inscribed on the walls behind that are the words, "*Father, forgive.*" For almost 80 years, reconciliation, forgiveness, and unity have been at the heart of Coventry Cathedral's ministry. The Coventry Cross of Nails has become for many a symbol of forgiveness, reconciliation, and peace.

How much of the current pain, heartache, violence, hatred, destruction, and waste of human and material resources in our nation and the world is due to the inability of people to sacrifice, to be reconciled, and to forgive? **On a personal and national level how important are the ability to sacrifice – to give up something that's important, beneficial, or valuable to us (our Onesimus)? To reach out to or help those who we have hurt or who have hurt us? How important is the willingness and ability to forgive?** The ability to do these things in the spirit of Christ, not in anger, bitterness or resentment brings tremendous benefit to us and to others. It would bring healing to our land. The inability or unwillingness to do these things leads to broken relationships, marriages, families, and communities, bad or no communication, even violence & bloodshed – which we see every day.

Our appreciation of Paul would be poorer if we didn't have this little letter that expresses so simply and with such dignity the value and importance of reconciliation. And we're grateful that Philemon forgave Onesimus and welcomed him back as a beloved brother, which I am sure he did otherwise the letter never would have been saved in the first place!

Prayer Lord Jesus, who is the way, the truth, and the life, heal our selfishness and deliver us from vain conceit. Help us reset our values to where each one of us truly

looks out for one other as brothers and sisters in the family of God. Enable us to see all we still have in common with someone with whom we may disagree.

By your grace, help us dare to travel the road to reconciliation and a new way of living, always being open to the promptings of your Holy Spirit to consider the ways you are calling us to change, be transformed, and renewed in our thinking, speaking, and acting so that day by day and week by week our life may more fully reflect the love, compassion, and Spirit of Christ whose name we claim as his disciples. May we pray for ourselves in the words of the song:

Spirit of the living God fall afresh on me.

Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on me.

Break me, melt me, mold me, fill me.

Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on me.

Spirit of the Living God move among us all.

Make us one in heart and mind, make us one in love.

Humble, caring, selfless, sharing –

Spirit of the living God move among us all.

Hear us, loving, living God, as we pray from the depths of our broken hearts.

Amen and amen

Blessing: The grace of the Lord Jesus be with your spirit. Philemon 25

Questions for Discussion or Reflection

1. What do you notice about how Paul communicates to Philemon in this letter? How does he strive to persuade Philemon to do what Paul thinks is right and wants him to do?
2. Do you notice any “classic” Pauline words and phrases in this letter?
3. In your experience, what makes reconciliation so challenging?

4. Who do you think has the most difficult task – Paul having to lose the benefit of Onesimus, Onesimus having to return to his master to ask forgiveness and risk losing his freedom, or Philemon, who is very publicly asked to forgive a former slave and to welcome him as a brother?
5. On a personal and national level how important are the ability to sacrifice – to give up something that's important, beneficial, or valuable to us (our Onesimus)? To reach out to or help those who we have hurt or who have hurt us? How important is the willingness and ability to forgive?
6. What can you learn from this successful story of reconciliation to help you in a relationship where you may need to take a step like Paul, Onesimus, and Philemon?