

Main Idea: In Philemon 12-16, we learn from Paul's example how to facilitate reconciliation between two brothers in Christ who are at odds.

First Century Slavery: The context that created the need for reconciliation...

1. The Bible doesn't attack the institution of slavery.
2. The Bible calls on slaves and masters to make the gospel attractive (Titus 2:10).

I. We must experience reconciliation with God.

II. We must pursue reconciliation with one another.

- A. Paul encouraged Onesimus to return to Philemon (12-13).
 1. He commended Onesimus (12).
 2. He says he wanted to keep Onesimus (13).
- B. Paul encouraged Philemon to receive Onesimus (14-16).
 1. Reconciliation cannot be forced (14).
 2. Reconciliation begins when we see God's hand in the situation (15).
 3. Reconciliation results in seeing each other as beloved brothers (16).

Make It Personal: Two bottom line lessons...

1. Jesus Christ can make a difference in our relationships.
2. Jesus Christ will make a difference in our relationships if we submit to Him.

Scripture Reading: Philemon 8-16

One of the most beautiful words in the Bible is *reconciliation*. Reconciliation is something that God has given us in Christ by His grace, according to Romans 5:11. "Not only is this so, but we also boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation."

We need to experience reconciliation, first with God, and then with others. And what we need, God has provided.

As we're going to see today, God used something very terrible to give us a vivid picture of the beautiful gift of reconciliation. I have in mind *first century slavery*.

If you had lived 1900 years ago, there's a good chance you'd have been a slave. 1900 years ago the Romans controlled the known world of the biblical lands. And estimates say that fifty percent of the population were slaves.

It's true. I read there were 60 million slaves in the Roman Empire. When Christianity spread in those early days to places like Ephesus, Colossae, Thessalonica, and Philippi, its message impacted a society in which slavery had been culturally accepted for hundreds of years.

A familiar proverb was "So many slaves, just so many enemies!"²

The average slave sold for 500 denarii (one denarius was a day's wage for a common laborer). Educated and skilled slaves were priced as high as 50,000 denarii. If a master chose, he could set his slave free. Or if he had the means, a slave could buy his freedom (Acts 22:28).

** Note: This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church. It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

¹ For a previous development, see the Philemon series at WBC on Sunday evenings in 2003.

² See Wiersbe

A man named Philemon had a slave named Onesimus who caused him a great deal of heartache. One day, Onesimus robbed his master, and ran away. God directed the slave's steps to Rome, where Onesimus ran into the apostle Paul who was under house arrest as a Christian. You know the story. Paul led Onesimus to Christ. Then he sent the slave back to his master with a God-inspired cover letter.

This morning we return again to that important letter, Paul's epistle to Philemon.

When you read the book of Philemon, there's one shocking fact that has caused commentators to wrestle with this letter. It's something that Paul did NOT say. When Paul sent the slave Onesimus back to his master Philemon (who by the way was a good friend of Paul), Paul did not tell Philemon to set Onesimus free.

Why not? Did Paul endorse slavery? He didn't, but why then didn't he condemn slavery in a letter like this? For that matter, based on Philemon, what should be our response today towards slavery and other social injustices?

Abraham Lincoln resolved the slavery issue in our country 150 years ago, with the Emancipation Proclamation. But slavery remains a social ill today. In China for instance, hundreds of millions of people live in perpetual serfdom, with few rights.

Allow me to broaden the issue. What about other social blights that demean the image-bearers of God, like abortion and pornography? What responsibility does the church have when it comes to social problems?

The responses of Christians are varied. Some bomb abortion clinics. Some write letters to congressmen. Others picket. Others join rallies. Others do nothing. Which is right?

Paul's letter to Philemon gives us helpful guidance in sifting through this issue. You may be surprised at what the apostle has to say. And doesn't have to say.

Before we investigate today's text in Philemon, we need to talk a little more about the biblical attitude towards slavery.

First Century Slavery: The context that created the need for reconciliation...

When you read the Bible, and particularly the New Testament, two things stand out about slavery.

1. *The Bible doesn't attack the institution of slavery.*
2. *The Bible calls on slaves and masters to make the gospel attractive.*

Paul gave this instruction to Titus in Titus 2:9-10, "Teach slaves to be subject to their masters in everything, to try to please them, not to talk back to them,¹⁰ and not to steal from them, but to show that they can be fully trusted, so that in every way they will make the teaching about God our Savior attractive."

That last phrase is critical, for it sums up the Christian ambition when it comes to slavery, and in every situation. *To make the gospel attractive.*

Lightfoot had this to say about Paul's perspective on slavery, "The word 'emancipation' seems to tremble on his lips, but he never utters it."³

Why didn't Paul condemn slavery? Why didn't he start a campaign against it?

For one reason, slavery was an integral part of the ancient world. The whole society was built on it. Frankly, a crusade against slavery would have only made things

³ Barclay, p. 271

worse for slaves. Powerful masters would have clamped down and made conditions even more harsh.

But there's another more important reason. A campaign against slavery would have branded the new movement of Christianity as dangerous and revolutionary.⁴ The Romans would have ruthlessly crushed the church if they perceived it to be a political movement.

But Christianity is not a political movement, is it? Our mission is not political, though we have social responsibilities. Our primary mission is making disciples of Jesus through the proclamation of the gospel.

This is critical to see. The early Christians did not attack slavery. The results would have been disastrous. Instead, they showed the world an alternative. They modeled a new type of relationships, so as to make attractive what makes these new relationships possible, namely the gospel.

In Galatians 3:28 Paul wrote, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus."

1 Corinthians 12:13 says, "For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body—whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink."

Jesus Christ makes a difference in the way people relate to each other. In Christ there are no classes of people. Though there may be in the world, we are all one in Christ. Social status doesn't matter in Christ. One person may be a master, another a slave. But both are equal in Christ.

In fact, the NT is very blunt about the subject. Paul gave very practical and pointed instructions to Christian masters and slaves. Let's notice two texts:

Ephesians 6:5-9 "Slaves, obey your earthly masters with respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ. Obey them not only to win their favor when their eye is on you, but like slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from your heart. Serve wholeheartedly, as if you were serving the Lord, not men, because you know that the Lord will reward everyone for whatever good he does, whether he is slave or free. And masters, treat your slaves in the same way. Do not threaten them, since you know that he who is both their Master and yours is in heaven, and there is no favoritism with him."

Colossians 3:22-4:1 "Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything; and do it, not only when their eye is on you and to win their favor, but with sincerity of heart and reverence for the Lord. Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving. Anyone who does wrong will be repaid for his wrong, and there is no favoritism. Masters, provide your slaves with what is right and fair, because you know that you also have a Master in heaven."

I want you to take note of something very important. When did Paul write Ephesians and Colossians? When he was in prison in Rome. Who else was with Paul while there in prison? Onesimus was. Barclay says it's not difficult to think that Paul's long talks with the runaway slave Onesimus contributed to his teaching about slaves and masters in Ephesians and Colossians.

⁴ observation by Lucas

So to sum it up, Paul didn't campaign against slavery. He just instructed Christians to show the world an alternative. Jesus Christ designs for the local church to be an oasis in a barren society. Don't compromise with society. Change society by living out an alternative community. Be salt and light. Show the world the difference. Yes, Jesus Christ can and should make a difference in our relationships.

So first century slavery was actually a context that created a need for reconciliation. And that's what we learn about in Philemon.

Reconciliation. The book of Philemon says two unmistakable things to us.

I. We must experience reconciliation with God.

That's why Jesus came, died on the cross, and defeated death. To reconcile sinners back to God. We must experience reconciliation with God, and can, through faith in the Reconciler, Jesus the Christ.

And once we do...

II. We must pursue reconciliation with one another.

Love God. Love one another. That's the fulfillment of the Law.

Now, let's take a close look at our text. In Philemon 12-16, we learn from Paul how to facilitate reconciliation between two brothers in Christ who are at odds.

When we left off last time, we heard Paul telling Philemon how Christ transformed a useless person into a useful person. Verses 10-11, "I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, who became my son while I was in chains. Formerly he was useless to you, but now he has become useful both to you and to me."

Christ reconciled Onesimus to God by becoming his Savior. Paul saw it happen firsthand. And when he did, he took action to help Onesimus do what any reconciled to God sinner must do.

A. Paul encouraged Onesimus to return to Philemon (12-13).

Why return to Philemon? Because reconciliation was needed. So Paul sent Onesimus back to his master. With a letter.

Notice verse 12 "I am sending him—who is my very heart—back to you." What did Paul think about Onesimus?

1. He commended Onesimus (12).

Do you remember how Paul complimented Philemon back in verse 7? He told him, "Your love has given me great joy and encouragement, because you, brother, have *refreshed the hearts of the saints.*"

Do you recall what we said about that word "hearts?" It's not the normal word for "heart" (*kardia*), but the word *splagchna*. The KJV translates it "bowels." It refers to a person's inner parts (liver, bowels, etc). It represents a person's deep, inner, personal needs. Paul told Philemon, "You refresh people where they hurt the most, down deep."

Now watch what Paul has to say about Onesimus in verse 12. He does the same thing Philemon did. He is "my very heart," Paul said. Paul thought the world of Onesimus, because of what Christ had done in and through him. "He's my own heart, Philemon. Make sure you treat him properly, because the way you treat him is the way you treat me. He's dear to me." Paul certainly knew the art of friendly persuasion, didn't he?

Paul shared something else to facilitate reconciliation.

2. *He says he wanted to keep Onesimus (13).*

Notice the specific compliment Paul gave to Onesimus, verse 13. “I would have liked to keep him with me so that he could take your place in helping me while I am in chains for the gospel.” Paul says he would have “retained” him (KJV). Why? So he could keep ministering in Rome.

The term for “helping” (“ministered” in the KJV) is *diakonei*. Gromacki points out that the verb does not refer to the technical service of a church deacon, but to general ministry. Onesimus had been involved in, and would continue to be useful in ministering to Paul in prison.

What types of things did Onesimus do to minister to Paul? Keep in mind that Paul was under house arrest, according to Acts 28:30. Perhaps Onesimus brought food to Paul. Maybe he helped with domestic needs. Possibly he served as Paul's messenger, ran errands, and was Paul's link with the outside world. He could have assisted Paul in praying for and assisting the Roman church. And no doubt, he helped break up the pain of loneliness in the apostle's lengthy prison stay.

There is a tradition, stemming from an ancient letter written by Ignatius to the Ephesians, that Onesimus later became a minister of the gospel. In fact, tradition says he eventually became the bishop of the Ephesian church.⁵

Whatever he did, Onesimus was highly regarded by Paul. Yes, highly regarded. To the point that Paul hated to see him go.

But he had to go. The past had to be cleared up. So Paul sent Onesimus back to Philemon.

What exactly did Paul want Philemon to do with Onesimus? Look again at verse 12, “I am sending him—who is my very heart—back to you.”⁶ The verb “sending” [or “sent again” in the KJV] can have a technical, judicial meaning, “to refer a case.” The reason Paul sent Onesimus to Philemon was because he wanted the master to see for himself whether his runaway slave had changed.

That's interesting. Does everything automatically change when a person becomes a Christian? Do all past problems simply go away? Did they in your life?

No. Think again about Onesimus. Christ made him a new person on the inside. God forgave Onesimus for the sake of Christ. But Onesimus still had sin scars from his past. He had a criminal record. He had committed a serious crime against Philemon.

So what did Paul instruct Onesimus to do? “Go back to your master. Ask for his forgiveness. Make restitution. Let him see the change Christ has made in your life.”

It's like what the prodigal son did in Jesus' story in Luke 15:18. After wasting his life, not to mention his father's inheritance, he came to his senses, went home, and said to his father, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you.”

Let this sink in. As Christians we must always welcome back the brother who has blown it. But we must *be* that brother too. If we have unresolved issues we must take steps to resolve them, knowing that pleasing Christ is more important than any temporal consequences.

⁵ As recorded in Gromacki

⁶ “Receive him” in the KJV is not in Greek text of v 12, but in v 17.

Suppose before becoming a Christian, you stole merchandise from your employer. Then you repented to God, and put your trust in Christ. Does God forgive you? Yes, because Christ took sin's penalty for you. But God also does something else. He gives you the responsibility and ability to pursue reconciliation with your boss by making restitution.

Like Zachaeus did. Remember him? In Luke 19, after Jesus came into his life, he gladly made things right with the people he had ripped off as an ungodly tax collector. That's the evidence that Jesus had truly entered his heart and life.

So first of all, Paul encouraged Onesimus to return to Philemon. But there's another side to reconciliation, and Paul addressed it next in verses 14-16...

B. Paul encouraged Philemon to receive Onesimus (14-16).

We learn three practical lessons about reconciliation from what Paul did with Philemon.

1. Reconciliation cannot be forced (14).

Paul had a great respect for Philemon. Paul valued Philemon's friendship. As his spiritual son, his opinion and feelings mattered to him.

So Paul sent Onesimus back. Why did he say he did that? Verse 14 "But I did not want to do anything without your consent, so that any favor you do will be spontaneous and not forced."

Here's the KJV rendering of verse 14, "But without thy mind would I do nothing." Think about that. Onesimus was doing a great job in the ministry. But Paul sent him back. He put the ministry on hold. Why?

Don't miss this. There's something more important to the Lord than our ministry. What's that? Jesus gave us the answer in John 17:21, "*That all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me.*"

"That they may be ONE..." What's more important than ministry?

Unity is. Unity between two brothers in Christ takes precedence over the ministry they may be doing. "If you are offering your gift at the altar and remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift... First, go, and be reconciled to your brother (Matt 5:23-24)."

That's why Onesimus went. And why Philemon needed to receive him. The relationship between these two followers of Jesus had to be resolved before ministry could continue.

We get it turned around sometimes. We think that if we're active in ministry, it somehow compensates for our past broken relationships. Sort of a works based standing with God.

But God accepts us entirely for Christ's sake. He reconciled us to Himself on the basis of His grace. And now He calls us to pursue reconciliation on the basis of grace.

It's important to emphasize that Paul did not bulldoze Philemon around. Granted Onesimus was a great asset to him. And granted he had earned the right (if you want to put it that way) to borrow the services of Philemon's slave. But sometimes what we have a right to do may not be the best thing to do.

Such was the case here. Listen again to Paul's appeal. Verse 14 "But I did not want to do anything without your consent, so that any favor you do will be spontaneous and not forced."

Paul wanted Philemon to make the decision on his own. He sent Onesimus back. He sent a letter explaining the circumstances. But he didn't want Philemon to be motivated by guilt or fear, but rather by love.

If you've ever been hurt deeply by someone, you too have a choice to make. Make the person pay. Or forgive and be reconciled.

Can someone force you to make this reconciliation? No. It won't be real. Indeed, when it happens it's a gift of God's grace and therefore all glory goes to the Giver of that grace.

You say, "Okay, I see that, but I need help. Where do I start if I know I ought to be reconciled, but don't feel like it?"

Good question. That brings us to lesson two.

2. Reconciliation begins when we see God's hand in the situation (15).

That's the next thing Paul does with Philemon, when he says something very pointed in verse 15 and the first part of verse 16. "Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back for good— no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother."

Why did Onesimus run away? You say, "Because he chose to." And that's right. What Onesimus did was wrong. He committed crimes against his master. He stole from him. He skipped the country. What he did was illegal and flat out wrong.

But do our sins handcuff God? To the contrary, God can overrule wrong and use it to accomplish His good purpose.

Psalms 76:10 says (in the KJV), "Surely the wrath of man shall praise Thee; the remainder of wrath shalt Thou restrain."

So Paul says to Philemon, "Friend, did you ever stop to think that perhaps God allowed you to suffer a temporary hurt so that you (and others) might enjoy an eternal reward? Specifically, yes, what Onesimus did to you was wrong. But God used his wrongful running from you to bring him to faith in Christ. That means you lost a slave for awhile so that you might gain a brother forever!"

The sovereignty of God is one of the most encouraging and comforting doctrines in the Bible. God is in absolute control. No, He does not cause evil, but He's in control of it, keeping its spread in check and even using it to bring about the fullest manifestation of His glorious plan.

Joseph affirmed that, for this truth was foundational for him. Remember Joseph's words to the brothers who had sold him into slavery? Genesis 50:20 "You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives."

Peter affirmed the same truth about the most wicked deed ever committed, the crucifixion of God's own Son. "This man was handed over to you by God's deliberate plan and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross (Acts 2:23)."

This is so important. Reconciliation begins when we see God's hand in the situation. God can turn our pain into blessing. He can use great tragedy to bring us (and

others) great reward. In Philemon's case, if there had been no separation, there would have been no reception.

Notice the contrast in verse 15: "...he was separated from you *for a little while* [KJV "departed for a season" (lit. "for an hour")]... that you might have him back *for good* [KJV "receive him forever"]."

I like the way commentator Robert Gromacki put it, "What is an hour compared to eternity?"⁷ Yes, the sinful actions of Onesimus brought pain into Philemon's life. But the pain was temporary. And the potential gain was eternal.

Think about that, Philemon, is Paul's plea.

This is one of those truths that's easy to talk about in church, and hard to remember when we're in the crisis. God is in control of even the most difficult experiences of life. And He invites us to trust Him. And if we are trusting Him we'll be willing to take risks with people, to step out and do the difficult, of course by His help and for His glory.

I can't help but think about Steve Saint, and Mincaye. Mincaye, one of the Auca warriors in Equador, killed Steve's father, Nate, and four other missionaries in 1956. But Steve not only forgave Mincaye, but experienced a full reconciliation with this man that Christ saved, who actually became his own children's adopted grandfather.

Yes, reconciliation begins when you see God's hand in the situation.

3. *Reconciliation results in seeing each other as beloved brothers (16).*

Notice the end of verse 16, "He is very dear to me but even dearer to you, both as a man and as a brother in the Lord."

When reconciliation occurs, that's the result. Two people once alienated by sin now see and treat each other as beloved brothers.

Let's take this story to heart.

Make It Personal: I see two bottom line lessons here...

1. *Jesus Christ can make a difference in our relationships.*

God's own Son came into this world to reconcile sinners to God and then to each other. That's what the church is, a group of sinners who have been reconciled to God through faith in His Son, and to each other.

Jesus can make a difference in our relationships. Let's not give up on people. If we're not right with people, let's take steps to make things right. If we see two brothers who aren't right with each other, let's do what Paul did with Onesimus and Philemon.

2. *Jesus Christ will make a difference in our relationships if we submit to Him.*

People ought to be able to tell if we are Christians by looking at how we treat others. Granted, even non-believers treat a select few people civilly, but we ought to treat *all* people as our Savior did.

Can people tell you are a Christian by looking at the way you treat the people who have sinned against you? Do you have any Onesimus's in your life? Are you willing to take to heart what we have seen this morning and take steps to treat them as Christ has treated you?

⁷ Gromacki, p. 198.