

Main Idea: In Philemon 8-11, we see peacemaking in action, as Paul models for us two characteristics of a peacemaker.

I. Here's the approach of a peacemaker (8-9).

- A. Paul mentions what he could have done (8).
- B. Paul makes it clear that he choose to do something else (9).
  - 1. He based his appeal on the divine standard.
  - 2. He based his appeal on his age.
  - 3. He based his appeal on his example.

II. Here's the appeal of a peacemaker (10-11).

- A. He calls attention to the family bond.
- B. He calls attention to the past problem.
- C. He calls attention to the present reality.
  - 1. Onesimus is now useful to me.
  - 2. Onesimus is now useful to you.

The Bottom Line: When it comes to peacemaking, the gospel changes everything.

- 1. The gospel changes my standing before God.
- 2. The gospel changes your standing before God.
- 3. The gospel enables us to stand together as we live for God.

*Scripture Reading: Psalm 107:1-22*

One of the most vivid ways God puts the glory of His grace on display is by reconciling people who were at odds with each other. We all know what sin does to our relationships. We've all been sinned against, and know how hard it is to forgive an offender and let that person get close again. And we've all been on the sinning end too, and know how hard it is to humble ourselves and go seek forgiveness and reconciliation.

But when it happens, when the offender repents and seeks forgiveness, and when the one sinned against forgives and restores, it's a powerful testimony to the glory of God's grace.

Only God can reconcile sinners to Himself and to each other. And He does! He is a peacemaking God. That's why He sent His Son into the world, who went to the cross, taking our sins upon Himself to give us peace with God. And it's why He calls us to do as He did, to be *peacemakers*.

Jesus said, “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called the sons of God (Matt 5:9).”

A peacemaker is a person who sees a broken relationship, and takes steps to mend that relationship. God did with us. We're to do the same with others.

Which is precisely what we see Paul doing in the little epistle of Philemon. A good title for this book would be **“Peacemaking in Action,”** for that's what Paul is doing here. As he takes pen in hand, he's taking the role of a peacemaker.

How do you help two people who aren't on good terms because of sin? That's a situation we've all faced. Any parent who has more than one child has. Any teacher has. Any coach has. Any deacon or pastor has. Any church member has.

That's what Paul was facing. About three decades after Jesus returned to heaven, the apostle Paul was in prison in Rome, arrested for preaching the gospel of Christ. Paul couldn't go anyway, so the Lord brought someone to him, a runaway slave by the name of Onesimus. Paul befriended that sinner, and introduced him to Christ, and became his spiritual father.

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\*\* 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.

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

He learned Onesimus's story, a fugitive who had robbed his master and skipped town. As Paul learned the details, he began to see the hand of providence in this, for he knew Onesimus's master. Indeed, he was a good friend and brother in Christ by the name of Philemon.

So what do you do if God places you in the middle of two brothers who are at odds with each other? You do what Jesus said and did. You become a peacemaker.

What's that look like? It looks like what Paul did with these two brothers. First, Paul helped Onesimus see his need to repent, place his trust in Christ, and get right with God. And then make things right with his master. How? By facing up to his sins, and taking the penalty for them, if necessary, and making restitution.

And because he wanted to please Christ, that's what Onesimus did. He made the painful trip back home to submit himself to Philemon.

But there's another side to this broken equation, and Paul the peacemaker addressed that too. He didn't send Onesimus home emptyhanded. He wrote a letter to Philemon (and would have gone in person had he been able) to help him know how to deal with Onesimus.

We looked at the first part of the letter the past two weeks. Paul begins by expressing his deep love for Philemon, "our dear friend and fellow worker" (1). "I always thank my God as I remember you in my prayers," verse 4. "Your love has given me great encouragement," verse 7, "because you brother have refreshed the hearts of the saints."

If you're going to be a peacemaker, that's where you start, by affirming the evidences of grace you see. Philemon, I affirm that God has used you to refresh the hearts of the saints.

And now here's one more heart you have the opportunity to refresh, my friend. Verse 8, "Therefore." Beginning in verse 8, Paul gets down to the business at hand, and in verses 8-11, models for us two characteristics of a peacemaker.

### I. Here's the approach of a peacemaker (8-9).

How did Paul handle the delicate situation concerning Onesimus? First...

**A. Paul mentions what he could have done (8).** In verse 8, "Therefore, although in Christ I could be bold and order you to do what you ought to do." Notice the line of reasoning...

"Therefore," Paul says. The apostle had just commended Philemon for refreshing others. Philemon had a reputation for being a refresher. That's good, and that's exactly what's needed right now.

Paul says he had the right to charge Philemon. "I could be bold and order ['enjoin' in KJV] you." He could have insisted on Philemon restoring Onesimus. It was what this brother "ought" to do. Frankly, it's what any Christian brother ought to do with another Christian brother, for it's the Christian thing to do.

Forgiveness, of course, is not optional. Jesus taught it in the Lord's prayer, "Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors (Matt 6:12)." This is Christianity 101. "For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins (Matt 6:14-15)."

This is the obligation of every believer, "forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you" (Col 3:13).

So if Philemon resisted, Paul could have told the Colossian church to get involved. He could have instructed them to discipline Philemon if he refused to obey the instructions of Jesus in the way he treated Onesimus.

Paul could have commanded Philemon. After all, he was an apostle. He had the divine authorization. He had the right.

Furthermore, he had the right because Philemon owed him. Apparently, based on what he says in verse 19, Paul was Philemon's spiritual father and had earned the right to assert influence upon his spiritual son.

What's more, what he was about to ask Philemon to do was "fitting" [as the Schofield KJV puts it]. This was simply the proper thing to do.

So yes, Paul could have. But you know, sometimes it's best to lay down your titles and rights. For there are times when it could do more harm than good to use your authority to get something done. You may win the battle, but lose something far more important.

A good parent knows this. "You should do it because I said so," is true enough. Children ought to be taught to obey their parents. And parents should expect obedience and deal firmly with disobedience.

But when we're at the instruction phase, "Do it because I said so," probably isn't the best way to communicate, not if our goal is to raise children that will honor God without us around. And that is the biblically-minded parent's goal, to help the child make Christ-honoring decisions because he *wants* to, not simply because we force him to do so.

So watch Paul the peacemaker. After mentioning what he could have done..

**B. Paul makes it clear that he choose to do something else (9).** Verses 8-9, "Therefore, although in Christ I could be bold and order you to do what you ought to do, yet I appeal to you on the basis of love. I then, as Paul—an old man and now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus."

Instead of approaching the situation as an apostle to a church member, Paul addressed Philemon as a fellow family member. "Philemon, I want to bare my heart to you, brother to brother." "Yet for love's sake I rather beseech thee," is the KJV rendering.

Paul didn't command. He "beseeched." What does that mean? The Greek term *parakalo* means "to call to one's side; to exhort, encourage, appeal." Paul didn't tell him what to do. He encouraged. He appealed.

But this wasn't a take-it-or-leave-it appeal. He based his request on some things that would be very significant to Philemon, as to any member of God's family. On what did Paul base his appeal? He highlights three things.

*1. He based his appeal on the divine standard.*

What's that? Verse 9, "I appeal to you on the basis of *love*." "For love's sake."

There's the divine standard, as Jesus made it clear in John 13:34-35, "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."

What is supposed to characterize our relationships as God's people? *Love*. We ought to have a reputation for being people who *agapao* each other, who love each other as God has loved us, in sacrificial, selfless, giving ways.

Paul exhorted the Romans, "Owe no man anything, but to love one another.; for he that loves another has fulfilled the law (Rom 13:8)." In 1 Corinthians 13 the apostle made it clear that the greatest virtue, the greatest standard of Christian maturity is agape love.

It's on that basis that Paul made his appeal to Philemon. "I want to ask you to do something that God would do, Philemon, in fact, that God did, *for love's sake*."

### *2. He based his appeal on his age.*

He continues in verse 9, "I then, as Paul—an old man." "Paul the aged," is how the KJV puts it. Literally, it reads "The elder."

In Paul's day, older men were considered wise and thus authoritative. We've lost that sense of appreciation for the wisdom of the elderly in our day. God designed the "godly grizzlies" (as Hendricks calls the senior men) to lead the way in the church. Those who've been down the road, who have walked with God for many years, who have seen Christ work in and through them in their family life and job life and community life and church life, have much to say to the younger generations.

Billy Graham will turn 97 this coming Saturday, November 7 (born in 1918). I've been listening recently to his book, *Nearing Home: Life, Faith, and Finishing Well*, which he wrote at the age of 92.

"Golden years' must have been coined by the young," he said. "It is doubtful that anyone over seventy would have described this phase of life with such a symbolic word."<sup>2</sup>

He also said, "I often wonder if God, in His sovereignty, allows the eyesight of the aged to cast a dim view of the here and now so that we may focus our spiritual eyes on the ever after."

When asked about the purpose of his book, Billy Graham said:

"God doesn't want us to waste our latter years or spend them in superficial, meaningless pursuits. Instead He wants us to use them in whatever ways we can to influence those who will come after us. God wants us to finish well, and one of the ways we do this is by passing on our values and our faith to those who will follow us. The greatest legacy you can pass on to your children and grandchildren is not your money or the other material things you have accumulated in your life. The greatest legacy you can pass on to them is the legacy of your character and your faith."<sup>3</sup>

Brothers and sisters, old age isn't a guarantee, but a stewardship from the Lord. And if He gives it to us, He wants us to use it for His kingdom purposes, not ours.

Like Paul did. Granted, Paul certainly wasn't ancient, for he's probably between 55 and 60 years of age, and for comparison the apostle John will live to be almost 100. But Paul was an older man who has been down the road enough to know something about this matter of forgiveness facing Philemon.

I'm thankful for the older men who speak truth into my life, starting with my father. There's a line I've heard from dad several times in the last five years. "Life's too short, Brad." Specifically, life's too short to see something you should have done, and not do it, like seeing a problem in the lives of people you care about that's not being unaddressed. Life's too short not to do something about it if you can.

Thirdly, after basing his appeal on the divine standard of love, and his age...

### *3. He based his appeal on his example.*

Verse 9 concludes, "I then, as Paul—an old man and now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus." Why does Paul mention that fact ("I'm a prisoner"), and mention it here? Is he trying to evoke Philemon's sympathy? Perhaps. But there's something very practical in this.

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<sup>2</sup> Billy Graham, *Nearing Home: Life, Faith, and Finishing Well*

<sup>3</sup> <http://mariashriver.com/blog/2011/10/qa-billy-graham-his-new-book-nearing-home-life-faith-and-finishing-well/>

Paul knows Philemon is facing a huge dilemma. This isn't kindergarten stuff. We're talking about a couple of felonies here (theft and running away), crimes punishable by death. If Philemon pursues reconciliation with Onesimus, it's going to cost him, financially, emotionally (he trusted this guy and he violated that trust), and it may cost his reputation too, for the other business owners in town will say he's gone soft.

So Paul says, "Listen my friend. I know all about cost. I'm a prisoner of and for Jesus Christ, and it's because of my allegiance to Him that I am held captive. Philemon, I've paid a price for my service to Christ, and I'm going to ask you to do something that may cost you. It may hurt your business contacts. It may put you on bad terms with the other masters in Colosse. But I can assure you, it will be worth it all when we see our Master, Jesus Christ."

So there's the approach of the peacemaker. Paul didn't simply tell Philemon what to do with Onesimus. He went after his heart, appealing on the basis of the divine standard, his age, and his own example.

We can learn a lot about working through interpersonal problems from Paul's example here, first from his *approach*. Yet there's more.

## II. Here's the appeal of a peacemaker (10-11).

Notice Paul repeats his desire again in verse 10, "I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, who became my son while I was in chains."

I appeal to you. I beseech you. That's the same term he used in verse 9. He doesn't actually mention what his appeal is until verse 17. He's building up to it, for it won't be easy for Philemon to do, not after what Onesimus had done to him.

Take a look ahead to the actual appeal in verse 17, "So if you consider me a partner, welcome him as you would welcome me."

Whoa. Welcome him? Receive him [KJV]? That request goes crossgrain to Philemon's natural instincts. That's not the way we feel like treating someone who has caused us loss and pain.

So how is Paul going to convince Philemon to do this very unnatural thing? He calls attention to three things.

### **A. He calls attention to the family bond.**

Verse 10 again, "I appeal to you for my son, *Onesimus*." Wow! He just called Onesimus *my son*. That surely got Philemon's attention. He'd connected many titles to Onesimus in recent months—like *thief*, and *crook*, and *good for nothing*. But not this one. Paul's *son*?

Yes, and that's critical for Philemon to see. The person with whom you have a problem is *my son*. And since you are *my brother*, Philemon (that's the term Paul used in verse 7 and will again in verse 20), that makes the two of you *family*.

So if you know two Christians who aren't right with each other, here's you start as a peacemaker. Help them see that they are *family*. This is my family member. This is your family member, because of Christ.

### **B. He calls attention to the past problem.**

Notice verse 11, "Formerly he was useless to you." That's a pretty blunt thing to say, but it was true. Onesimus used to be flat out *useless* to Philemon. The AV says, "Who in time past was to thee unprofitable."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> The term "useless" or "unprofitable" literally means: "not" + "to use," hence *useless*.

That's what Onesimus was to Philemon, a useless slave, and there's no getting around it. Paul makes no excuses for Onesimus. Not, "Come on Philemon, give the kid a break. Everybody makes mistakes."

No, you can't sugar-coat this by calling it immaturity or a mistake. There's a real problem here, and Paul puts it on the table. Philemon, I agree that Onesimus was useless to you.

I don't know if he was lazy on the job, or if he shirked his responsibilities, or if he was a talker instead of a worker. Maybe he lied by calling in sick when he wasn't, or cut out early. I don't know. But the facts are that Onesimus cheated his boss, and went AWOL, and was worthy of the term *useless* as it pertained to his job performance.

This is a vital part of peacemaking. Paul didn't gloss over Onesimus's past, but was upfront about it. Yes, Philemon, he was useless to you.

But here's the key word in that sentence. *Was*. Past tense. "*Formerly*," says Paul. "In time past" [KJV]. In other words, this is what Onesimus was when he was an unsaved man.

But a change has taken place. Something has happened to this man who was once useless. When did the change occur? Paul says it happened when "he became my son." And what a day that was, the day when Paul introduced Onesimus to Jesus Christ and the Spirit of God opened this useless law-breaker's eyes, and he was born again!

Brothers and sisters, it's important at this point for all of us to remember what we, too, once were—and still would be—apart from the grace of God. Peter put it this way, "Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy (1 Peter 2:10)."

The only difference between what we were and are now is *mercy*.

No wonder Jesus said in Luke 17:10, "So you also, when you have done everything you were told to do, should say, 'We are *unworthy servants*; we have only done our duty.'"

The truth is, it's not just Onesimus that was once useless. We were all useless...*to God*. You say, "That's a pretty strong charge." Yes, but it's true. The Bible says that God created us to live for Him, but we didn't. Not one of us were doing what God created us to do. We each went our own way. We robbed God of His good gifts and ran away from serving Him, our good Master, and lived for ourselves.

But praise God, there's more to the story! Notice verse 11 "Formerly he was useless to you, *but now he has become useful* both to you and to me." Don't miss what Paul is doing.

### C. He calls attention to the present reality.

Once useless, but no longer. Now useful! That's the present reality for this man. He has become *profitable*, both to you and to me.

Again, all because of the mercy and grace of Jesus Christ. When Jesus entered Onesimus's life, He made him a new creation. Onesimus became "profitable." In fact, that's what his name means. The name Onesimus, a common slave name, means *useful*.

How ironic! And what a fitting testimony to the power of the gospel of Christ! When a sinner believes in the One who lived a perfect life, died on the cross for his or her sins, and defeated death, that useless sinner is no longer a useless sinner. He or she is now Onesimus, *useful* to God and others.

Paul actually used the same word to describe another person who had been useless at one point in his own life, John Mark. In 2 Timothy 4:11 Paul wrote, "Only Luke is

with me. Get Mark and bring him with you, because he is *helpful* [lit. of good use] to me in my ministry.”

Now a word about this change. The potential for usefulness happens the moment a person believes in Christ, as the Holy Spirit comes and takes up residence. But usefulness is a process. In order for a useless person to become useful he must take some practical steps.

For instance in 2 Timothy 2:21 Paul explains, “If a man cleanses himself from the latter, he will be an instrument for noble purposes, made holy, *useful* to the Master and prepared to do any good work.”

Onesimus had a very important step to take if he wanted to continue being useful to his heavenly Master. He had to go back to his earthly master and make things right. And that’s exactly what he did.

You see, if you are a true Christian you want to be *useful*. You want to be used for the glory of God and the good of His people.

Think of the implications. Christians ought to be the best workers, the hardest working students, the most faithful citizens. Why? Because our Savior saved us so we could be *useful*, to His glory.

Paul specifically says Onesimus was useful in two ways...

*1. Onesimus is now useful to me.*

How so? Look again at verse 10. “I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, who became my son while I was in chains.” In what ways did Paul consider Onesimus to be useful to him?

For starters, he called him a *son*. Paul actually called Onesimus his son (lit. “my own child”). The KJV uses the term “begotten” which means “to bring forth.” In fact, it says, “whom I have begotten.” “I” gave birth, Paul says. There’s a sense in which the person who leads another to Christ is a spiritual parent.

Did you ever notice how Paul thought of himself as a “father” to the people he won to the Lord? He called Timothy his son. He called Titus his son. So too Onesimus.

The Lord gave me the privilege of having two children, and I was responsible as a dad for Julie and Katie’s nurturing and development. You love your children too. You’ll make great sacrifices to make sure they grow properly. That’s a parent’s responsibility.

Know this. We have no less responsibility for our spiritual children. When God gives us the privilege of birthing a spiritual child, He calls us to stand by them and help them grow.

Ministry is *family* business. Do you think of it that way? Sunday School teachers, do you view the members in your class as *family*? Do you agonize over their spiritual development? Do you labor for them in prayer? Do you get involved in their lives so as to help them grow? Do you help them when they are at odds with a brother or sister?

The same goes for Youth workers, Kids Club workers, deacons, and other ministry leaders. God wants us to see those He has placed under our care as *family*.

But as in family, it’s not all giving. Nor was it when it came to Paul’s relationship with Onesimus, who was useful in another way. Paul says in 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.”

There’s the goal of discipleship. To take a babe in Christ to the place where he or she is personally involved in a ministry for Christ. That’s now true for Onesimus. He has become part of Paul’s prison ministry team. This once, good for nothing runaway slave is now useful for Paul.

But not just for Paul. At the end of verse 11 Paul says...

2. *Onesimus is now useful to you.* To you and to me.

In what ways had Onesimus become useful to Philemon? In two ways.

First, he would now be a profitable worker on the job. Formerly, he'd been a thorn in Philemon's side, but now he could be a great asset to his master, for Jesus had given Onesimus a whole new motivation for living.

But secondly, and more importantly, he's useful because he is now a precious brother in Christ. That's Paul's point in verses 15-16, "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. He is very dear to me but even dearer to you, both as a man and as a brother in the Lord."

So a useless slave became a useful servant and precious brother in Christ. What an incredible turnaround! Only Jesus Christ could do that. And He is still doing the same thing today.

I wonder who you identify with most in this story. Perhaps you came today feeling like the old Onesimus. "My life is useless, and everybody agrees. That's why I feel like just running away."

Or maybe you feel like the new Onesimus. "I'm not the person I used to be, but I have a mountain of a past that's haunting me."

Or maybe you feel like Philemon. You've been hurt badly by someone and you'd be fine if you never saw that person again.

Or maybe you identify most with Paul today. You have two brothers in Christ, and they both love you, but there's a huge wall between them.

And you are wondering what to do. I have good news for you, some good, bottom line news.

### The Bottom Line: When it comes to peacemaking, the gospel changes everything.

Yes, the gospel. The gospel begins with bad news. You are a sinner, and so are the other people in your life, worthy of God's wrath and condemnation. But the good news is that God is a peacemaker, and sent His Son to reconcile sinners to Himself and each other, by means of His death on the cross and triumph over the grave. God now forgives and gives new life to any sinner who will repent and believe in His Son.

Have you accepted His gospel invitation? Have you? If not, why not now? And if you have, then please take to heart three powerful implications.

1. *The gospel changes my standing before God.* I am not the person I used to be. Useless no longer. Now useful to Him and others. That's what the gospel says, and something I need to affirm—the gospel changes my standing before God.

But there's something else I need to affirm.

2. *The gospel changes your standing before God.* So think of that brother or sister you've been avoiding, or speaking critically of. Christ died for him or her too, and he or she is now standing right where you stand. Before God. Accepted and loved by the same Father who loves and accepts you, entirely for Christ's sake.

3. *The gospel enables us to stand together as we live for God.* So whether I identify most with Onesimus, or Philemon, or Paul, what I need is the same. To feel again the wonderful reality of the gospel, because in the gospel we have all we need to stand together as we live for God.

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called the children of God.