

Wheelersburg Baptist Church 6/4/2023  
“Connecting the Gospel to Life: Learning from Philemon”<sup>1</sup>  
Series: “*The Gospel Disconnect*”<sup>2</sup>

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Main Idea: We see two vital gospel connections in Paul’s epistle to Philemon.

The context: Slavery was an evil reality that created the opportunity for gospel-produced 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. If we believe the gospel, we experience reconciliation with God.
  - II. If we believe the gospel, 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).

The Bottom Line: Two take aways...

1. Jesus Christ can make a difference in any relationship.
2. Jesus Christ will make a difference in a relationship if we embrace His gospel.

We love the gospel at WBC! The gospel is the good news of what God has done for the world. The gospel is not what we do for God, but the message of what He has done for us. Paul summed up the gospel in 1 Corinthians 15:3-6, saying, “For I delivered to you what I also received, that Christ died for our sins, according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, raised on the third day, according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared...”

So the gospel is God’s work. The proper response on our part is to believe it, to believe Him. Whoever believes in Him, whoever receives the One He sent into the world, His own Son as Lord and Savior, receives the gift of eternal life.

But then what? What is God’s intent for saving sinners? Many don’t seem to know. In fact, there are millions of people who say they believe in Jesus whose lives remain virtually unchanged from their BC days.

According to a 2021 study by the Cultural Research Center at Arizona Christian University, nearly 70% of Americans use the term “Christian” to identify their faith.<sup>3</sup> Interestingly, according to a Gallup report, for the first time since the late 1930s, fewer than half of Americans say they belong to a church, synagogue or mosque.<sup>4</sup>

There’s a disconnect, and we’ve been seeking to address this reality in our series, *Gospel Disconnect*. God Himself shows those of us who believe in His Son how to connect the gospel to our lives. Where? In the 21 New Testament epistles. We’ve looked at 1 Peter, Romans, Ephesians, and Hebrews. These were all letters written to churches. This morning we’re going to finish our series by investigating an epistle written to a person who was facing a dilemma on what to do with a problem-person.

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<sup>1</sup> 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>2</sup> For a previous look at this passage, see the message preached on 11/15/2015 as part of our series on Philemon.

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.arizonachristian.edu/2021/08/31/crc-report-finds-nearly-70-of-americans-claim-to-be-christian-but-what-does-that-mean/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://religionnews.com/2021/03/29/gallup-fewer-than-half-of-americans-belong-to-a-church-or-other-house-of-worship/>

Do you have any problem-people in your life, people whose sinful choices are making life difficult for you? We all do, don't we? We need what we're about to see.

The man's name was Philemon, and the person who wrote this epistle was the apostle Paul. Philemon's problem-person was a man who betrayed his trust, stole from him, and skipped town. How should he respond to this man? In this letter Paul shows his friend Philemon how the gospel should shape his response.

We're going to see a familiar pattern this morning. When the gospel is rightly seen, it produces gospel connections. It must, or we're not seeing it clearly.

*Scripture Reading: Philemon 8-16 (our focus will be on verses 12-16)*

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

All of us need to experience reconciliation, first with God, and then often with other people. And what we need, God has provided for us through the gospel of His Son.

God used something very terrible to give us a vivid picture of the beautiful gift of reconciliation. I have in mind *first century slavery*. Warning. This will be a rather long introduction, but it's necessary if we're to make the necessary gospel connections.

The context: Slavery was an evil reality that created the opportunity for gospel-produced reconciliation.

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.

I read there were sixty million slaves in the Roman Empire. When Christianity spread in those early days to places like Ephesus, Colossae, Thessalonica, and Philippi, its message penetrated a society in which slavery had been culturally accepted for hundreds of years. A familiar proverb was "So many slaves, just so many enemies!"<sup>5</sup>

The average slave sold for 500 denarii (a 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).

In our story we're introduced to a man named Philemon, who had a slave named Onesimus. They were both were non-Christians, pagans. Onesimus caused Philemon a great deal of heartache. One day, Onesimus robbed his master, and ran away. He ended up in Rome, in the providence of God, where he met, of all people, the apostle Paul!, who was under house arrest as a Christian.

Paul did what he did wherever he was, and with whomever he met. He presented the gospel to Onesimus. And God did what He loves to do. He opened the eyes of this runaway slave, who repented of his sin, and asked God to forgive Him. And God did forgive him. Why? Because this repentant sinner put his total trust in Jesus Christ and the payment He made for sins on the cross. And God is faithful and just to forgive any sinner who repents, confesses his sin, and trusts in His Son.

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<sup>5</sup> See Wiersbe

Yet God does something else, too. By the power of His gospel, God begins to change that repentant, forgiven sinner, and enables him to do the hard, necessary things that show the fruit of his repentance. Like this hard, necessary thing.

Onesimus had to go home. Why? He had to face the consequences of his sin and make things right with Philemon. Would that be hard? Yes, incredibly so. He could be executed for what he had done. So why go then? Because of the gospel.

Because of the gospel, we take sin seriously. Because Jesus died for our sins, we seek forgiveness, from Him, and from those we've sinned against. And because of the gospel, we help our brothers and sisters as they're seeking to make things right.

Like Paul did. Paul encouraged this runaway slave to go back to his master. But he didn't send him empty-handed. He wrote a letter for him (think of it as a reference letter), so he could take it and put it in the hands of his master, Philemon.

More about that in a moment. First, we must address another shocking reality that has caused readers of this letter a lot of consternation. It's something that Paul did NOT say. When Paul sent this 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? Why didn't Paul say, "You should not have had a slave in the first place, Philemon. Take it easy on this man. He can't be held responsible for his crime. You oppressed him. You were wrong."?

Did Paul endorse slavery? No, he didn't. But he didn't condemn it either, not in this letter or any any New Testament letter. Why not? Why didn't Paul condemn slavery in a letter like this? This is a vital question for us.

We all know that Abraham Lincoln addressed the slavery issue in our country 160 years ago with the Emancipation Proclamation. Or did he? By the stroke of a pen, he removed the institution of slavery, but not the heart issues that produced it. A pen can't change the heart. Let's keep that in mind as we wrestle with what Paul did not do with his pen.

The fact is, slavery remains a terrible blight to this day. In China (and other places), hundreds of millions of people live in perpetual serfdom, with few rights. Even in our country, the residue of abolished slavery remains, for the heart must be changed.

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. We may be surprised at what the apostle has to say. And doesn't have to say.

When you read the Bible, and particularly the New Testament, we are confronted by these two important realities regarding slavery.

1. *The Bible doesn't attack the institution of slavery.* That doesn't mean that slavery is acceptable, for it's a blatant violation of the second command, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." Why then doesn't the Bible attack the institution of slavery? The answer is, because it goes after something much deeper. Not the institution, but the heart that produced it. And there's only one thing that can change the heart of a man.

The gospel. On the basis of the gospel, God not only forgives sinners, but also changes the heart of the sinner. And this brings us to the second critical reality.

2. *The Bible calls on slaves and masters to make the gospel attractive.* This is the language we find, for instance, when Paul gave this instruction to Titus in Titus 2:9-10 (written around AD 63), “Teach slaves to be subject to their masters in everything, to try to please them, not to talk back to them,<sup>10</sup> 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.”<sup>6</sup>

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 worse for slaves, for 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.<sup>7</sup> 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 it affects politics. How? By going after the hearts of politicians, and everyone else too, including masters and slaves and Republicans and Democrats and every other man-created classification. And how do we accomplish this? By making disciples of Christ through the ministry of His gospel, so that it’s believed, and then connected to life.

This is critical to see. This is why the early Christians did not attack the institution of slavery, for the results would have been disastrous. Instead, they went after the heart of it. How? They showed the world a superior, joy-filled, gospel-centered alternative, which they modeled in living color.

For instance, 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.” He’s not talking to the Roman senate, but to the church, those who are in Christ. He’s calling on the church to love each other regardless of worldly distinctions, so as to make attractive what makes these loving relationships possible, namely the gospel.

The gospel changes us inside-out, as Paul explains in 1 Corinthians 12:13. “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.”

Here’s the order. Jesus Christ changes the heart. And then Jesus Christ begins to change the way His people relate to each other. It’s not coincidental that Paul gives very practical and pointed instructions to Christian masters and slaves in several of his letters. Now that they’re in Christ, they must live out these gospel connections.

For instance, notice Ephesians 6:5-9, written around AD 60, “Slaves, obey your earthly masters with respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart, **just as you would obey**

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<sup>6</sup> Barclay, p. 271

<sup>7</sup> observation by Lucas

**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 **servicing 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.**”

Paul says something similar in Colossians 3:22-4:1, written around AD 60, “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 servicing.** 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, around AD 60. 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.

So to sum it up, Paul didn't campaign against slavery, but did something better, something that God used to transform the heart that produced slavery (and every other ill of society). He presented gospel realities, and taught believers to cherish those beautiful realities, to be energized by those realities, and to live in light of them.

Now, we're ready for Philemon. In this special, one chapter epistle, we're going to see two vital gospel connections.

### I. If we believe the gospel, we experience reconciliation with God.

This is why Jesus Christ came to earth, died on the cross, and defeated death. He came to reconcile sinners back to God. We don't work our way back into God's favor. Jesus takes us there.

We meet several saved sinners in this letter. We meet the author, Paul, in verse 1, who introduces himself as “a prisoner for Christ Jesus.” Interesting, isn't it? There was a time in his life that Paul was putting Christians in prison, until Christ Himself broke into his life. Now he's a prisoner *for* Christ.

In verse 1, we also meet some other saved sinners, including Timothy, who co-authored this letter. And we meet the recipients, Philemon, Apphia, Archippus, and the church that met in their house. What do all these people have in common? They have all heard the gospel, and believed it, and by that gospel have been reconciled back to God.

This is our greatest need, beloved, to experience reconciliation with God. And this is what we experience, not by our efforts, but His, when we believe His gospel.

And once we do, there follows a second gospel connection.

### II. If we believe the gospel, we must pursue reconciliation with one another.

Love God. Love one another. This is the essence of the Law, and this is what the gospel produces, people who are reconciled to God who then, when necessary, pursue reconciliation with each other.

And here's a case when it was necessary. In verse 10 we're introduced to a man by the name of Onesimus. Interesting name, for Onesimus means "useful". It's interesting because there was a time not long ago when this was *not* true of Onesimus. Paul acknowledges this in verses 10–11, "I appeal to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I became in my imprisonment. <sup>11</sup> (Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful to you and to me.)"

I don't know exactly what kind of worker Onesimus was, but apparently he did as little as possible. He was *useless* to Philemon, says Paul. Not a very flattering term, but apparently quite accurate. And past tense. It's what Onesimus *was*.

But no longer. Now he's *useful*, says Paul, to you, Philemon, and to me. Amazing! Talk about a change! What made the difference? Jesus Christ did. Jesus Christ reconciled Onesimus to God by becoming his Savior. Paul saw the transformation firsthand. And when he did, he celebrated, and then 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? Why did Paul encourage Onesimus to return to Philemon? The answer is, because of the gospel. Reconciliation is what the gospel produces. It reconciles sinners to God, and then, if necessary, to each other.

And in this case, reconciliation was necessary. So Paul sent Onesimus back to his master, but not empty-handed. He sent him with a letter, this letter.

Notice verse 12 (NIV), "I am sending him—who is my very heart—back to you." Notice Paul's assessment of this young convert, Onesimus.

1. *He commended Onesimus (12).* He calls him "my child" in verse 10, and "my very heart" in verse 12. To put this in perspective, recall the compliment that Paul extended to Philemon back in verse 7. He told him, "For I have derived much joy and comfort from your love, my brother, *because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you* (ESV)."

Interesting word. 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."

And what does Paul have to say about Onesimus in verse 12? He says that Onesimus does the same thing that Philemon did. He is "my very heart," Paul affirms.

This is quite a commendation. Paul expresses appreciation for Onesimus because of what Christ had done in and through him.

He's my own heart, Philemon. I want you to keep that in mind now that you're seeing him again. I know there are problems in his past that he must face, and that's why he has come home. But as he faces them, remember that he is not who he used to be. He is now useful, to you and to me. He is my very heart.

Paul certainly knew the art of friendly persuasion, didn't he? But it's more than that. Paul knew the power of allowing the gospel to shape the way we think about people, especially people who have hurt us.

Paul shared something else about this young convert.

2. *He says he wanted to keep Onesimus (13).* Notice the specific compliment Paul gave regarding Onesimus in verse 13 (ESV). "I would have been glad to keep him with me, in order that he might serve me on your behalf during my

imprisonment for the gospel.” Paul says he would have “retained” Onesimus (KJV) and kept him in Rome. Why? So this new brother could “serve me on your behalf.”

The term for “serve” 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 serve Paul? Keep in mind that Paul was under house arrest, according to Acts 28:30. Perhaps Onesimus brought food to Paul, or served as his messenger. Perhaps he ran errands, did legal legwork, and was Paul's link to the outside world. Perhaps he assisted Paul in caring for the church in Rome. And certainly, his presence helped alleviate the loneliness the apostle felt during this 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.<sup>8</sup>

Whether that's true or not is debatable. But this we know. Paul highly regarded Onesimus. Yes, highly regarded. To the point that Paul hated to see him go.

So why did he go? Because he had to go. Why? What was prompting his return? The gospel was. There was a gospel opportunity facing this new believer. The opportunity? To put the gospel on display by facing an unresolved issue from his past.

So Paul sent Onesimus back to Philemon. To what end? What exactly did Paul want Philemon to do with Onesimus?

Look again at verse 12 (NIV), “I am sending him—who is my very heart—back to you.”<sup>9</sup> The verb “sending” can have a technical, judicial meaning, as in, “to refer a case.” So the reason Paul sent Onesimus to Philemon was so that Philemon could 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. He became a new person on the inside when he believed the gospel. God forgave him for the sake of Christ. But Onesimus still had sin stains from his past, in fact, a criminal record. He had committed a serious crime against Philemon. And now, enabled by the gospel, he had the opportunity to make things right.

How? “Go back to your master,” Paul explained. “Ask for his forgiveness. Make restitution. Let him see the change Christ has made in your life.”

It reminds me of what the prodigal son did in Jesus' story in Luke 15:18. After wasting his life, including 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 sin issues, we must take steps to resolve them, knowing that pleasing Christ is more important than any temporal consequences.

Suppose before becoming a Christian, you stole merchandise from your employer. Then you repented to God, and put your trust in Christ. Did God forgive you? Yes, because Christ took sin's penalty for you. But God also does something else. He gives

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<sup>8</sup> As recorded in Gromacki

<sup>9</sup> “Receive him” in the KJV is not in Greek text of v 12, but in v 17.

you the ability and responsibility 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 here's the first side of reconciliation. Paul encouraged Onesimus to return to Philemon. But there's another side, and Paul addresses it as well in verses 14-16...

**B. Paul encouraged Philemon to receive Onesimus (14-16).** This is so helpful. 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, who was his spiritual son. He valued Philemon's friendship, and his opinion and feelings mattered to him.

So why did Paul send Onesimus back to Philemon? Notice the answer he gives in verse 14 (NIV), "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. And what is that? Jesus tells us 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.*"

What's more important than ministry? *Unity is.* Unity between two brothers in Christ takes precedence over the ministry they may be doing.

Jesus said in Matt 5:23-24, "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."

That's why Onesimus went. And why Philemon needed to receive him. The relationship between 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. Granted Onesimus was a great asset. 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, this time in the ESV. "But I preferred to do nothing without your consent in order that your goodness might not be by compulsion but of your own accord."

Paul wanted Philemon to make the decision willingly. He sent Onesimus back. He sent a letter explaining the circumstances. But he wanted Philemon to be motivated, not by guilt or fear, but by love, gospel-motivated love.



If you've ever been hurt deeply by someone, you too have a choice to make. You can allow the barrier to remain. Or you can take steps to remove the barrier.

You say, "Okay, I want to do the latter, but how? Where do I start if I know I ought to be reconciled, but don't feel like it?" Good question. This brings us to lesson two.

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

We need the vertical perspective, which is what Paul helps Philemon to see in verse 15 and the first part of verse 16. "For this perhaps is why he was parted from you for a while, that you might have him back forever,<sup>16</sup> no longer as a bondservant but more than a bondservant, as a beloved 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 morally wrong.

But do our sins handcuff God? No. To the contrary, God can overrule wrong and use it to accomplish His good purpose. Psalm 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 loss so that you (and others) might enjoy an eternal reward? Yes, what Onesimus did to you was wrong, but God has used his wrongful running from you to bring him to faith in Christ. And this 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, comforting doctrines in the Bible. God is in absolute control. No, He does not cause evil, but He's in control of it, containing its spread, 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? In 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 painful past into cause for His praise and our 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 glorious reunion.

Notice the contrast in verse 15 (NIV): "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?"<sup>10</sup> Good question. Sure, the sinful actions of Onesimus brought pain into Philemon's life. But the pain was temporary. And the potential gain was eternal.

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

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<sup>10</sup> Gromacki, p. 198.

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, glorious task of putting the gospel on display.

I 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.

Gospel connections are glorious to behold! But there's one more. Yes, reconciliation begins when you see God's hand in the situation. But it doesn't end there.

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

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

When true reconciliation occurs, this is the result. Two people once alienated by sin now see and treat each other as beloved brothers. The truth is, we are family, and we will live together forever. So we must choose to do so now.

Let's take this story to heart.

The Bottom Line: Two take aways...

1. *Jesus Christ can make a difference in any relationship.* God's own Son came into this world to die for our sins. This is the gospel. He came to reconcile sinners to God and then to each other. And 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 a relationship if we embrace His gospel.* 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. And we are empowered to do just that, by the gospel.

My friend, do you have any Onesimus's in your life? If so, are you willing to take to live out the gospel and take steps and treat that person as Christ has treated you?

Or perhaps you are Onesimus. And the gospel which says, "Christ died for your sins" is now saying to you, "It's time to be set free from the power of those sins which has been holding you captive, by seeking forgiveness, and making restitution, if necessary, all to the glory of our Savior."

**Closing Song:** #183 "Beneath the Cross of Jesus" (verses 1, 2, 3)

**June Benediction:** Jude 24-25 (KJV)

**Church fellowship meal** (with the Scioto Hills summer staff)