

Reconciliation 1

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[0 : 0 0] We are going to be looking at the first three verses or so and this evening God willing will continue our studies on in Philemon. Paul's letter to Philemon is the shortest of all of Paul's writings but we would be very remiss if we didn't think it had much to teach us about the power of the gospel to transform lives and relationships. It's a small letter but it packs quite a punch. It has been described as the breath of the great hearted tenderness of the apostle Paul and one of the most charming letters ever written. And I don't know about you, I know today we don't often write letters, we tend to send emails or Facebook or WhatsApp or whatever else we do but I would love to be able to write letters such as this one. There's just a beauty and when we know the background which we'll think about in a little minute it's even more beautiful the way Paul writes.

There is a very difficult pastoral situation and Paul writes with gentleness and tactfulness to his friend and fellow Christian Philemon to address the problem. Paul was heeding the words of Proverbs chapter 15 verse 1, a gentle answer turns away wrath but a harsh word stirs up anger. And what an example you can almost imagine Philemon after rereading this letter saying I'll have to do what Paul says, I'll have to do it, he's right you know. And before we dig into the letter let's lay down some foundations. What is the problem that Paul was addressing when he wrote to Philemon? Well Philemon was a wealthy slave owner from the town of Colossae and he was a member of the church at Colossae who in he loved Jesus he was a Christian. Onesimus was one of his slaves and Onesimus had decided to run away from his master and a hint given in verses 18 and 19 perhaps suggests that he has also stolen from his master when he ran away. We don't know what it was but he's maybe stolen something as he has run away. Running away alone was punishable by death under Roman law let alone stealing from your master as well. Onesimus had disregarded his master and had humiliated him. Now when you think of slavery in Paul's time it would be quite wrong to imagine the American plantations or ships filled with slaves being sold to work that's perhaps usually what we would think of when we think of slavery. This slavery is based on being captured and sold or coming from a particular race or culture but in Bible times slavery had much more to do with on your birth and how much money you had. In fact if you didn't have enough money you could sell yourself into slavery to pay off your debt. That is slaves of course could be out treated as they could be in any other time but not necessarily and the idea seems to be that Philemon was an okay master to serve under. We're not too sure but the context seems to suggest that Philemon was not a hard task master. Onesimus runs away to Rome. Now this would have been a very good city to hide out in because of all the people travelling through. You could have hid out there quite contentedly. However when Onesimus runs away to Rome he meets the apostle Paul who was in prison there and he becomes a Christian under Paul's preaching. I think that is absolutely awesome. That is God at work. That is God working so powerfully. You see that from verse 10. Paul describes Onesimus as a son. That is a son in the faith. I'm sure Onesimus's intention when he ran away was not that he would become a Christian. Of course it wasn't.

It was that he would run away and never be heard of again but he meets Paul and he is converted and saved soundly because you cannot run away from God. You cannot run away from God and he's saved. Now we also read from Colossians this morning because Colossians is a twin letter of Philemon. Now letters in those days weren't put in envelopes but to use the illustration there were letters put in the same envelope and sent to the church at Colossians. This one is addressed to Philemon. Colossians is addressed to the church at Colossians.

Twin letters. You can almost see Paul saying to Onesimus as he does Satan, you'll have to go back to your master. You're a Christian now and that makes all the difference. You will have to go back and be reconciled to your master and that's exactly what happens.

So Paul sends a man called Tychicus to Colossae. He has the letter to the Colossians. He has the letter to Philemon and he also has Onesimus with him as well. Two letters and a runaway slave gets sent back to the church at Colossae. Colossians would have been read publicly.

[5 : 55] To bearing in mind this is a scandal that the whole church would have known about. Everyone knew that Onesimus had run away from Philemon and verses like chapter 3 verses 12 to 13.

Therefore as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourself with compassion, kindness, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and here it comes. Forgive whatever grievances you have against each other. Forgive whatever grievances you have against each other and again in chapter 3 verse 22, slaves obey your earthly masters and everything and do it not only when their eye is on you to win their favour but with sincerity of heart and out of reverence for the Lord. That would have hit home massively to both Philemon, Onesimus and also to the entire church who was gathered listening. You can almost see the congregation gathered, silence comes over, all jaws drop, eyes start to move between Onesimus and Philemon as these words are read out. Are they going to obey the apostle Paul?

And then Tychicus says, wait a minute, there's a second letter. There's another letter addressed to Philemon. Now it is addressed to Philemon but if you read verse 2 it says, to Philemon our beloved fellow worker, to Afia our sister and Archbishop fellow soldier and the church that meets in your home you see this is a private dispute between Philemon and Onesimus but this letter has to be read out to the entire church. And before we move into letter itself we learn something very importantly here. Surely the dispute is between Philemon and Onesimus and it is, it is between them. Onesimus had wronged Philemon and no one else in the church had been affected by the runaway slave. Why then does Paul write and instruct this letter to be read out publicly? Well he does it for at least two reasons. The first reason is the general biblical principle that private sin should be dealt with privately, public sins publicly and although this was a private dispute it was known publicly. So the remedy had to happen publicly. And again it's also the case that although the offense was against Philemon other people in the church as well had been affected by it and the whole church could have started to take sides. You know what it's like when two families start to war against each other. People take sides. I'm standing for Onesimus, I'm standing for

Philemon and Paul is making doubly sure that that doesn't happen here. The remedy for the situation Paul writes is reconciliation. So what is the main theme of Philemon? The main theme of Philemon is reconciliation. Now that's a big word we don't often hear at an everyday conversation but it's something that we do understand. Reconciliation is simply bringing together two people or groups of people who have had a disagreement. It's a term that's used in the business world called mediation. It's also a term that primary teachers understand only too well. I was a primary teacher before entering the ministry and after every single lunch time you would spend at least 20 minutes seeking to reconcile two children who had fallen out in the playground. That's what reconciliation is, seeking to bring them both back together. And when the Bible speaks of reconciliation it speaks of at least two kinds of reconciliation. There is vertical reconciliation up and down which is reconciliation with God.

As I was saying to the boys and girls all human beings are not at peace with God. We are at war with God because of our own sin. There are no faults on God's side. We sinned and we turned our backs on him and the terrible thing is that because of our sin we don't even want to be reconciled to God. God would be just in leaving us to the punishment for that. But in love he has a wonderful rescue plan that his son Jesus who willingly chose to obey would be the sin bearer and by his cross all who believe in him and confess with their mouth that he is Lord are reconciled to God and God to them. Paul would say in 2 Corinthians chapter 5, we implore you in Christ's behalf be reconciled to God. That's the gospel command. Secondly there is also horizontal reconciliation and a vertical reconciliation is reconciliation with God. Horizontal reconciliation is reconciliation with each other. Since Christians have been saved by the death and resurrection of Jesus we are part of one family. One family.

[11 : 12] We serve the same Lord. We are called to love and obey him. Paul says in Ephesians, be completely humble and gentle. Be patient bearing with each other in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the spirit through the bonds of peace. Perhaps we could sum it up in this way. To love the Lord your God with all your heart so mind and strength and to love your neighbour as yourself. These are the two greatest commandments which sum up all of God's law.

So what type of reconciliation are we talking about here in Philemon? Well it appears to be the second horizontal reconciliation. There is a need for these two to be brought back together but you see the correct answer is both. It's both. You see the point that Paul is making is that Christians are to behave differently. Christians are to behave differently because they have been reconciled to God and a fruit of that should be a desire to be reconciled to our brothers and sisters in Christ. Love for God and love for God's people are marks of a true Christian. Love for our brothers and sisters in Christ flows from being made right with God first and this is a point that we'll keep on coming up as we go through this letter. And now that's the foundations. Let's look at these first three verses briefly together. There are six building blocks that Paul uses in the letter but this morning we're going to look at the first of them and it's partnership in verses one and three. Paul starts by reminding Philemon in verse one that it's Paul that's writing to him. Now who would have ever thought that Saul of Tarsus the persecutor of Christians would ever become reconciled to God. Paul was in effect a terrorist when it came to persecuting the church of

Jesus Christ. But you remember the story? He was steadily increasing in his zeal for persecuting Christians but on the way to Damascus to persecute some more he's blinded by a light. Jesus appears to him. Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? I am Jesus who you are persecuting and from that moment Paul became a prisoner of Christ Jesus. He became reconciled to God. And what an interesting phrase that we saw there in verse one, Paul a prisoner for Christ Jesus. Now you also see it again in Ephesians chapter three verse one and it comes again in verse nine of Philemon. The ESV translates it a prisoner for Christ Jesus. Now that's true of course. Paul is in prison when he's actually writing this letter. It's one of the four prison epistles but the NIV translates it a prisoner of Christ

Jesus which is a slightly different meaning. In other words Paul was captivated by Jesus Christ. He now served a new master and that seems to be a the correct rendering of the word. Paul's mind has helped captive to Christ. His life was now lived for Jesus where it hadn't been before. Paul could now say with the psalmist, I will do what God the Lord says. Christ had changed him from a persecutor to a preacher. The apostle is saying I am not free to do as I please but it gives me joy to do what God would have me do. He died for me. He came and sought me when I didn't know him and now I belong to him. And it's this Paul who's writing to Philemon and Paul reminds him that they both belong to Jesus and that makes all the difference. It's going to be his relationship with Jesus that means that he has to do something about Inesimus the runaway slave. Paul then includes Timothy as a co-author. You don't often think of Timothy as an author of any books in the Bible but he's a co-author with Paul, 2 Corinthians, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, Philippians, Colossians,

Philemon also mentioned Timothy as a co-author. And Philemon would have known Timothy's story as well. He was a shy and timid young man whose mother was a Christian but whose father wasn't. And he too came to know the Lord Jesus. Timothy had been reconciled to God as well.

[15 : 54] And then Paul says to Philemon our dear friend and fellow worker. Here we have a wealthy owner again saved by the grace of God. And is this not precious? You've got Paul. You have timid Timothy. You have a prosperous Philemon. Three unlikely people to be friends and brothers but they're fellow workers in the gospel. And the question being raised here subtly is why not Inesimus as well? Inesimus as well. Paul is saying look Philemon, you remember how God has been good to us, how God has saved us from an empty way of life lost in our sin.

We now belong to Christ and it gives us joy to serve Him. Inesimus now claims to have the same saviour that we do. We need to take him back. Reconciliation needs to happen. And this is a joy that there is no one but no one outside of reach of the glorious gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. You here today can be reconciled to God and God to you. There's no one too bad to be reconciled to God because the blood of Jesus is sufficient to cover over every sin. The vilest offender who truly believes that moment from Jesus apart and receives. You're saying how can I be reconciled to God? Do I have to bring a peace offering?

Do I have to deliver a fancy speech? Do I have to say specific words in a prayer? No. You simply trust in Jesus Christ for forgiveness. As the hymn puts it so well, nothing in my hand I bring. Simply to thy cross I cling. And what does this vertical reconciliation with God lead to? It leads to horizontal reconciliation. Timothy, Paul and Philemon are fellow workers in the kingdom of God. And it's staggering to think is it not that when you become a Christian, your family suddenly becomes a whole lot bigger. You've got brothers and sisters in Christ. Although I don't know many of you. If you're a Christian here today, I am your brother. That's what the Bible says. I am your fellow worker. I am your fellow laborer. That's what the Bible says. There is a partnership between believers. We're all brought together to serve God and to bring him glory. And Paul now says that Onesimus too has joined that partnership because he now believes in Christ. And Paul could say to another church and all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel. The being a Christian is not easy. In fact, when you become a Christian, sometimes things get a lot harder. Paul is testimony that Philemon onesimus too are testimonies that things are not easy in the Christian life. Philemon or onesimus had this big problem between them. But the gospel allows us to be reconciled.

There is surely nothing worse when two Christian brothers or sisters or brother and sister fall out and cause a schism in the church because of what Jesus has done for us as Christians.

We've got no right to bear grievances one towards the other. The gospel freezes up to take these to the Lord and to have them dealt with. We are reconciled to each other because the same Savior died for us, the same blood was shed for us. And when we remember what we were like before the Lord saved us, how can we possibly hold anything against a brother or sister in Christ? How can we? You can almost hear Philemon saying, I'll have to do it.

[19 : 53] I'll have to take Onesimus back. Paul's entirely correct. It would be amazing to have one partner in the gospel or even two. But Paul goes on to list two more in verse two and then even more at the end of the letter. We need a vatheur or sister who is another believer. We don't know anything about her. Maybe she was Philemon's wife. But what we do know is that she was a partner in Christ's work. We need about archipelago. Again, we don't know much about him either, but we know that he's saved. Do you see the importance of all of this? All humans are enemies of God. The fault or sin is on our side and God cannot allow his holy laws to be broken. He would be unjust if he did. And the only way for us to be saved is that another would come into the void. A mediator would get in the middle and Timothy tells us that there is a mediator. There is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who came and gave himself as a ransom for all people. Jesus, he is the mediator to bring us back to God. And what is more, God is the one who initiates the reconciliation.

That to me is staggering. You know what it's like if someone does you wrong and you say in your own heart, I am not going to forgive that person. I am not going to be reconciled to them. They are the one who has done wrong. If they want forgiveness, they have to come to me and they have to ask for it. I will not forgive them. Is that how God reacts? If God acted like that, if God did that same attitude, none of us would be saved and we would all be on the path to hell. But God who is the wronged party, he is the one who initiates the reconciliation. And what an example. What an example to us as well. We too should be reconciliation initiators. Now it's a hard thing. I'm sure it's a hard thing. It wouldn't have been easy for Philemon to forgive anesimus either. He was a thief. He had shown a flagrant disregard for his master. And perhaps there are onesimuses in our own life that we would struggle to forgive as well. How can it be done? How can forgiveness come? It seems impossible.

But at the very beginning of the letter as Paul often does, he gives us the reason. Verse 3, grace to you and peace from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ. Grace, reconciliation can come because of the grace of God. You see before the Lord, we are all onesimus. We are all onesimus when it comes to the Lord. We all are runaway slaves as it were. We have run away from him. We have shown a flagrant disregard for him by our own sin. And yet in his grace, he welcomes us back. He says, I'll have you. I'll have you just as you are if you will name my son Jesus as your Lord and Saviour. And if we are struggling with a brother or sister in Christ, we need to remember who we are. We belong to Christ who has forgiven us everything, everything. So surely compared to a brother or sister, they cannot have done as much against us as what we have done against the Lord. Philemon had received grace from God and now this grace has to be shown to onesimus. If he does, then the peace will be deeper. Now the interesting thing is here in that verse, grace to you and peace. The you there is plural. Now in English, we use the word you for singular.

We use the word you for plural. But I love what we do in Glasgow. We use use. We add an S even though it's not a word. We say use. And this word here is grace to use and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. It's going out to the whole church, not just to Philemon and Onesimus, because everyone required this grace to welcome this runaway back. And let's be practical just for a minute. Let's say you have been robbed by a Christian brother or sister and you're waiting for an apology from someone. And as Philemon, you might say, it's their fault. Surely it's up to them to come to me first. Well, if this is the way God worked, as I said, then no one would be saved. He and he alone initiated a plan of salvation. So you can go to someone first or say you're the one who's been wronged.

And as an SMS or Philemon rally, you might say, I can't go. What if they won't forgive me? Well, it's true. Maybe they won't forgive you, but you should still go because then your heart is right before the Lord. You should still go. You should try and attempt reconciliation.

[25 : 08] Now, it's right, though, to take another Christian brother or sister along with you. That's the regulations laid down in Matthew chapter 18, just as a side point there. But it's God's grace that can accomplish it. It's God's grace that reconciled us to God and to reconcile us to each other. His grace can soften the hardest heart, dissolve pride, restore relationships with brothers or sisters. And this is Christianity. This is Christianity. That's what we believe as the Lord's people. We are reconciled to God and should be reconciled to each other.

Whatever brawls disturb the streets, there should be peace at home. Where sisters meet and brothers come, there should be no anguish. There should be no grief. The little birds in their nests agree. It's a shameful sight when children of one family fall out and chide and fight. I read a story about an elder in a Scottish church. The church was not far away.

The church was not done blamed or any free church, just so that you know. Who at an elder's meeting had angrily disputed with the minister until he almost broke the minister's heart. The night after, he had a dream which impressed him so much. And his wife said to him, what's wrong with you this morning? What's the matter with you? And he said, well, I dreamed that I had a dispute with the minister. And the minister went home and died soon after.

Then I died as well soon after. And I dreamed that we both went up to heaven. And when I got to the gate, the minister came out, he put his hand to me, welcoming me, said, come on. There's no strife up here. I'm glad to see you. There's no strife up here. I'm glad to see you. So the minute the elder went to the minister's house to beg his pardon, the next day and found in truth that the minister had actually died during the night. And he was so smitten by the blow that two weeks later he followed the minister into the skies.

And it's no wonder that the minister did meet him and say, come on now. There's no strife up here. You know, the point being, there shouldn't be any strife down here either between brothers and sisters and the Lord Jesus Christ. The gospel allows us to be reconciled one to the other. We are to work together as partners in the gospel as Christians. We know and love Jesus and what to love each other. Do you know Jesus for yourself? Do you know him as your Lord and Savior? Perhaps you're saying, well, Jesus, I'll never have me. You'll never have me to actually say that is extremely to be extremely full of pride because Jesus says he will have you. That's what the gospel is. All who come to me, I will know wise cast out. That's all. It's a little tiny word, but it's huge. And what encompasses all who come to me, I will know wise cast out. Jesus will have you. If you trust him and obey him.

[28 : 19] Let's be reconciled to God and flowing from this. Be reconciled to our brothers and sisters finding in them dear fellow workers supporting us for Christ's sake. Trust and obey for there's no other way to be happy in Jesus, but to trust and obey. Let's pray. Our great God and Father in heaven, we thank you for the wonder of the gospel, not just been able to be reconciled to you, but also to be reconciled with each other and finding in brothers and sisters, dear members of Christ's family to share your work together. Lord, we thank you that you've given each one of us different gifts so that we have to use them together, leaning and depending on each other. Lord, help us, all of us to use the gifts that you have given us for the building of the body, choosing not to opt out because Lord, we know that that weakens the body. And Lord, we pray for those who are thinking through these themes of reconciliation, fallouts and between family members and Christians. Lord, we pray that you would give us the grace as you gave to Philemon and Onesimus to be reconciled one to the other in Jesus' name. Amen.