

# Small Books, Big Messages

## ***“The Road to Reconciliation – Part 1”***

### **Text: Philemon 1-7**

~ Delivered at Central Baptist Church on July 29, 2018 by Pastor Barton Priebe

#### INTRODUCTION

- (SHOW SLIDE 1) Jesus said, ***“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God.”*** Jesus did *not* say, ***“Blessed are the peace-lovers,”*** or ***“blessed are the peace-wanters.”*** These are all good things but Jesus said, ***“Blessed are the peacemakers.”***
  - Our passage today specifically addresses peacemaking between Christians. And there is great need for peacemaking between Christians.
- Many of you are part of Christian families where there are long standing feuds between siblings, cousins, in-laws, or parents. Family get togethers are tense. How should you be a peacemaker there? Or, how do you help those Christian marriages for whom the joy of the wedding has long since turned to bitterness? And I am not so naïve as to think that this church is perfect either. We are a family and sometimes families fight. I have no doubt that some brothers and sisters here are quarrelling with each other.
  - ***“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God.”*** But what does it mean to be a peacemaker?
- This is where the book of Philemon meets us at such a practical level. It is not long – it only has 335 words. It is *not* a book that develops the great themes of the gospel such as Christ’s death on the cross but a book about putting the gospel into practice. It is *not* about getting the gospel message right - it is about getting your relationships right in light of the gospel.
  - You see the book of Philemon is a powerful story about one man named Paul who seeks to be a peacemaker between two Christian brothers who are at odds with each other.
    - From Paul’s example in verses 1-7 we can see six characteristics of what it means to be a peacemaker.

#### THE BIG STORY OF PHILEMON

- Before we look at these six characteristics we need some background on this letter. The date is about 60 A.D. Verse 1 tells us that Paul writes the letter and that he is a prisoner, probably in Rome. The recipient of the letter is Philemon who lived in the city of Colossae.
  - Paul had led Philemon to Christ. In verse 2 we learn about Apphia who is probably his wife and Archippus who is probably his son. This family had moved to Colossae, set up their home, and hosted a church in their home.
    - Owning a home meant Philemon had some wealth. Like all wealthy people of his day he also owned at least one slave. We will have much more to say about this subject of slavery in the weeks to come but for now just listen to the story.
- Now evidently one of Philemon’s slaves, a man named Onesimus ran away and it appears from verse 18 that he had stolen some money or possessions from Philemon when he fled. Sometime after this Onesimus meets Paul and Onesimus becomes a Christian.
  - In fact, Paul says that Onesimus becomes a great help to him personally and to the gospel work. But Paul knows this cannot last.
    - The gospel of Jesus is not just about reconciling us to God. It is also about reconciling us to each other. And so one day Paul probably said, ***“Onesimus, you need to go back and make things right with Philemon.”*** What? ***“Paul, I think the prison food is messing with your head Paul. You do know that runaway slaves face severe punishments right?”***
- Paul knows how difficult this situation is. And so Paul writes two letters, one to the church in Colossae (the book of Colossians) of which Philemon was probably a leader, and one to Philemon himself.
  - In this second letter he asks Philemon not only to forgive Onesimus but to accept him as brother and even to free him so that he can serve alongside Paul.

- He then sends the two letters back to Colossae with Philemon and a man named Tychicus. So Col 4:7 says, ***“Tychicus will tell you all the news about me. ...He is coming with Onesimus, our faithful and dear brother, who is one of you.”***
  - Now can you imagine how difficult this must have been when Onesimus showed up at Philemon’s door?
    - But it was also difficult for Philemon. Paul’s request is crazy. Forgive Onesimus and let him go? If Philemon does this he would be the laughing stock of the community. And what about society at large? If one runaway slave gets freed this could undermine the whole system of slavery. Exactly! More on that over the next few weeks.
- Paul knows how difficult this situation is. But he outflanks all arguments with the gospel. Paul shows how the gospel should affect our behaviour, particularly in conflicts with other Christians. In this letter we learn a lot about Paul. Not Paul the great theologian, or the daring missionary, or the defender of the faith.
  - This is Paul the peacemaker – a man of tact and tenderness, candor and care. This letter is a masterpiece of peacemaking.
    - So with that background we are ready to see in Paul’s example six characteristics of a peacemaker.

### CHARACTERISTIC #1 – LIVING FOR A HIGHER PURPOSE

- The first characteristic of a peacemaker is this: **(SHOW SLIDE 2) A peacemaker lives for a higher purpose.**
  - Look at how courageous Paul is in writing this letter. Two of his close friends are in conflict with each other. Paul fearlessly, tactfully, and lovingly enters into their conflict as a peacemaker. He risks having both men turn on him in order to see them reconciled.
    - Most of us do the opposite. If it is not our problem we avoid it. We fear too much what other people think. We avoid conflict. Now of course you should not involve yourself in other people’s conflicts if you don’t have the right to be there. But when like Paul, you are well positioned between two people and can have a voice in helping to resolve the conflict, then that you are called to be a peacemaker.
- Peacemakers are not just peace lovers. Peace lovers stand apart from conflict. They love to hold hands around a campfire and sing, ***“Kumbaya my Lord.”*** But peacemakers don’t sing cliché songs about peace. Peacemakers get their hands dirty as they work to see conflict resolved.
  - So how do you, like Paul, get the courage to enter into a conflict as a peacemaker?
- The only way you will get the courage to do this is if like Paul you live for a higher purpose. Look at how Paul begins this letter. **READ 1 - Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother.**
  - Paul is not in prison because he committed a crime. He is in prison because of his faith in Jesus, because everything in his life is about Jesus. In verse 2 he calls Philemon his “fellow worker” in the gospel. He calls Archippus his “fellow soldier.” By starting the letter this way Paul puts the entire conflict between Onesimus and Philemon under the higher purpose of living for Jesus.
    - When, like Paul, your life’s highest purpose is to live for Jesus then you cannot just stand afar while two Christians are at odds with each other. You can risk losing relationships to make peace because you don’t ultimately live for people, you live for Christ. You can speak the hard words because you love these people so much that you want them to know the peace of Christ. A peacemaker lives for a higher purpose.

### CHARACTERISTIC #2 – MOTIVATED BY LOVE

- The second characteristic of a peacemaker is this: **(SHOW SLIDE 3) A peacemaker is motivated by love.**
  - Look at how Paul addresses Philemon in verse 1. **READ 1b - To Philemon our beloved fellow worker.** Before speaking any hard words to Philemon Paul verbally expresses his deep love for Philemon. He calls him his ***“beloved fellow worker.”***
    - In verse 3 he tells Philemon that whenever he prays for him he says, ***“Thank you God for Philemon!”*** Paul loves this man and expresses it.

- By virtue of our personalities, some of us are more inclined to avoid conflict and so we need to hear the first point about courage. But other Christians have the opposite problem. They have no problems entering into everyone else's business. They correct and rebuke regularly. Their tongues are sharp. They are always trying to set everyone else straight. They cause conflict. People avoid being around them. They have few friends. And then they defend their actions by saying, ***"As a Christian I am called to speak the truth."***
  - Listen to me very carefully now because this is a serious problem among Christians. You are *not* called to speak the truth. You are called to speak the truth . . . in love. You may be absolutely right in every word you want to say but if it is not motivated by love and expressed with love then you are nothing more than ***"resounding gong or a clanging cymbal."*** Alexander MacLaren has said, **(SHOW SLIDE 4) *"Kindness makes a person attractive. If you would win the world, melt it, do not hammer it."***
    - We will see this throughout the first seven verses. Long before Paul speaks hard words of truth, he verbally expresses his deep love for Philemon. A peacemaker is motivated by love.

### CHARACTERISTIC #3 – RELYING ENTIRELY ON THE GRACE OF GOD

- The third characteristic of a peacemaker is this: **(SHOW SLIDE 5) A peacemaker relies entirely on God's grace.**
  - Look at verse 3. **READ 3 - *Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.***
- Don't just blow past this statement. It is absolutely critical. Have you every noticed that every single one of Paul's letters, all thirteen of them, begin with some form of 'grace to you' and ends with some form of 'grace be with you'?
  - Look at how this letter ends. **READ 25 - *The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.*** Why does Paul sandwich all his letters with prayers for God's grace toward those who read them?
    - Is it not because, like Philemon, we first of all need God's grace just to be able to hear and understand what is being written? ***"Philemon, you are going to need grace to hear the hard words I am going to speak to you."***
    - And then secondly when we come to the end and we put down the scriptures we, like Philemon, need God's grace to change our hearts that we might obey what has been graciously written. We need grace!
- If you have ever acted as a peacemaker you know this truth deep in your soul. Peacemaking is so hard because conflict is so multi-dimensional. People's personalities are so different. Our sinful natures war against us. There is usually a long history behind each conflict. On top of all this there are evil spiritual forces that wrestle against us.
  - As Paul enters into this conflict he remembers what we must never forget – that true peace is the result of God pouring out his grace on us. We need grace to act as peacemakers. Those in the conflict need grace to make peace. And thanks be to God, there is endless grace available to us from the God of all grace.
    - Peacemakers rely entirely on the grace of God to make peace.

### CHARACTERISTIC #4 – A PERSON OF PRAYER

- The fourth characteristic is an immediate application of the third. If we need God's grace to be peacemakers then in the fourth place, **(SHOW SLIDE 6) a peacemaker is devoted to prayer.**
  - Paul starts his letter with a prayer for grace in verse 3. Then in verse 4 he tells Philemon that he has been praying for him. **READ 4 - *I thank my God always when I remember you in my prayers.*** Not only does he thank God for Philemon but we read in verse 6 that he makes requests to God about Philemon. **READ 6 - *I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective for the full knowledge of every good thing that is in us for the sake of Christ.*** We will explain this more in a few minutes but for now I will simply say that Paul is asking God for Philemon to reconcile with Onesimus. So Paul is covering this whole situation in prayer.

- Are you starting to feel the cumulative effect of all have said? Long before Paul speaks the hard words of truth he expresses love, he seeks the grace of God, and he covers the whole situation in prayer. Love, grace, and prayer. If you do those three things alone you are well on your way.
- I feel this deeply. As a pastor I have the tremendous *privilege* of being invited into people's conflicts. I did not say "the tremendous *fun*." It is never *fun* but it is a *privilege*. I try to help as best I can but many times I can see that the hearts of one or all parties are not prepared to make peace. There is bitterness and anger. No logic is going to overcome such things. It drives me to my knees in prayer.
  - But then there are the wonderful stories where God hears our prayers and we see people reconciled. I've sat with couples whose divorce papers are signed but not yet mailed and then watched over time as they reconciled. I've seen wayward teenagers get united back to their parents. I've seen adult children initiate reconciliation with their elderly parents as they seek to make peace before they die. I've been part of many mediation meetings and that have ended with people embracing. And I myself have been part of meetings where others have extended great grace to me and where I have found reconciliation.
    - God changes hearts and that is why a peacemaker is devoted to prayer.

## CHARACTERISTIC #5 – SEEING THE GOOD IN OTHERS

- Characteristic #5: **(SHOW SLIDE 7) A peacemaker sees the good in others.**
  - We come to verse 5 and still Paul has not even brought up the hard words. Paul says in verse 4, ***READ 4 - I thank my God always when I remember you in my prayers.*** And what does he thank God for? ***READ 5 - because I hear of your love and of the faith that you have toward the Lord Jesus and for all the saints.*** So notice that despite the fact that Paul wants to talk about Philemon's weaknesses, he first of all speaks about where he sees God at work in Philemon's life. He does not just keep it himself either. He verbally expresses to Philemon the good he sees in his life in his relationship with God and with other Christians.
    - He does the same in verse 7. ***READ 7 - For I have derived much joy and comfort from your love, my brother, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you.*** This word for "refresh" is a military word. After a long march the sergeant brings the troops to a stream and says, ***"Take 10 minutes and drink some water."*** Oh yes, Philemon has some areas where he needs to grow but Paul does not allow that to overshadow the good in his life.
- How different from those people who are always putting others down. All they can see are your faults. You can never be good enough for them. You can never measure up. They are sparing in encouragement but unsparing in correction. They are negative and harsh.
  - But not the peacemaker. Peacemakers are not naïve to other people's weaknesses and neither are they afraid to correct when needed. But peacemakers always see the good in others. They see where God is at work in your life and they are always telling you about it. Their words are filled with encouragement.
- Most of you know the name William Wilberforce. Wilberforce was a peacemaker. He spent his life working for the abolishment of slavery. As a young man he became very discouraged in the conflict. At that time the famous evangelist and preacher John Wesley, now a very old man, heard he was discouraged. Six days before Wesley died he wrote a letter to Wilberforce.
  - Here is a section of that letter. **(SHOW SLIDE 8) "Unless God has raised you up for this very thing, you will be worn out by the opposition of men and devils. But if God be for you, who can be against you? Are all of them stronger than God? O be not weary of well doing! Go on, in the name of God in the power of His might, till even American slavery (the vilest that ever saw the sun) shall vanish away before it...That He who has guided you from youth up may continue to strengthen you in this and all things is the prayer of, dear sir, your affectionate servant, John Wesley."**

- These timely words encouraged Wilberforce and he fought the rest of his life to make peace in this area. Three days before Wilberforce died Great Britain abolished slavery.
- Mature Christians see the good in others even when they are in conflict. They see the good because they know that God is always at work, that he is changing his people to be more like Jesus. And so a mature Christian, a peacemaker, encourages others with the good they see.
  - This is the culture we want to see develop more at Central – one of intentional encouragement. One that sees the good in others first and foremost. To help develop this culture we have an idea for you today.
    - In your bulletin this morning you will find a piece of paper. What we want you to do is to sit down and write a short note to someone in this church.
      - The paper already has the following sentence at the top. ***“I have seen evidence of God’s grace in your life and want to share a few areas for your encouragement.”*** Then be as specific as you can in your encouragement. When you are done give it to the person. Let’s develop a culture of peacemakers at Central. Peacemakers see the good in others.

## CHARACTERISTIC #6 – SEEING THE POTENTIAL IN OTHERS

- Characteristic #6: **(SHOW SLIDE 9) A peacemaker sees the potential in others.**
  - Look at verse 6. ***READ 6 - and I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective for the full knowledge of every good thing that is in us for the sake of Christ.*** Paul is asking God to do something in Philemon’s life. What is it? That he would be active in sharing his faith. We use that phrase to talk about doing evangelism but that is not at all what is meant here.
    - This word translated “sharing” was often used for business partnerships. It is a shared project that requires mutual participation for it to work.
- So here is what Paul is saying in verse 6. ***“Philemon, I see in your life that you already understand this mutual participation in the Christian life. You already demonstrate a love for Jesus that overflows into care for other Christians as you show them love and refresh their hearts. And now Philemon I am asking God that you would be even more active in this so that you can grow into full maturity in Christ.”***
  - Now obviously that is a little cryptic to Philemon but as he read the rest of the letter and understood Paul’s request for him to forgive and reconcile with Onesimus it would become very clear. The result of this is that Philemon will grow deeper into knowing Jesus.
    - So Paul does not just see the good that God is already doing in Philemon’s life. As a peacemaker Paul sees the potential for what God can do.
- Oh friends that is what we need in all our conflicts. We can never be people who give up on others for God never gives up on us. We can never give up on people because God has said that he is shaping his people into his image. When two Christians are at odds, you must walk into the situation seeing the potential for what God can do. A peacemaker knows that we are all in process.
  - Wives look at your husbands. Husbands look at your wives. You of all people know each other’s faults. What will save your marriage is seeing that God is making your spouse to be something they are not presently. Peacemakers see the potential in others.

## THE PRINCE OF PEACE

- But friends, we cannot just end here. We have seen Paul’s example but an example is not enough. We need our own hearts changed that we might be peacemakers. So how do we get this heart? By fixing our hearts on the Prince of Peace, the Great Peacemaker, Jesus Christ.
  - This is what changed Paul and what will change us. You must see that it was you who were in conflict with God. You had sinned against him. You were alienated from God with no ability to reconcile yourself back to your Creator.
- But out of love God sent His Son whose named is ***“the Prince of Peace.”*** Jesus did not live for himself. He lived for the higher purpose of reconciling us to God.

- It was love for you that motivated Jesus to go to the cross for as Paul says, ***“The Son of God loved me and gave himself for me.”***
  - He did not reconcile us to God because we deserved it. No, He did it out of free, unmerited, undeserved, grace. For ***“when we were God’s enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son.”***
- All Jesus’ peacemaking was done with prayer for ***“During the days of Jesus’ life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission.”***
  - And although there was no good in us for ***“there is no one good, no not one”***, and no potential for godliness for we were ***“dead in our sins”***, God made us alive in Christ. God will form the good in us for he has ***“predestined us to be conformed to the image of His Son.”***
    - God will bring about our potential ***“For we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.”***
- Friends this is message of Christianity – that God reconciled us back to himself ***“by making peace through Jesus’ blood, shed on the cross.”*** The good news of Christianity is that anyone who calls on Jesus to rescue them will have peace with God.
  - The more you see and saviour Jesus, the Prince of Peace, and all he has done for you, the more you will be shaped into his image as a peacemaker.
    - So let me ask you, where can you be a peacemaker? In your family? At work? In the church? What are you going to do today to make peace? ***“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God.”***