

**Small Books, Big Messages**  
**“The Road to Reconciliation – Part 2”**  
**Philemon 8-16**  
~ Delivered at Central Baptist Church on August 5, 2018

**INTRODUCTION**

- **(SHOW SLIDE 1)** This summer we are doing a series entitled *Small Books, Big Messages* where we are going through the short letters of Philemon and 2 John.
  - Today we are in part 2 of Philemon. This little letter is all about making peace where there is conflict between believers. There is such a need for us to learn about this.
- We need peacemaking in Christian marriages. I remember sitting with one man as he lamented the breakdown of his marriage saying, **“She just isn’t the same woman I fell in love with married.”** What does peacemaking look like for them?
  - We need peacemaking in how we relate to our parents. I read a good line in a novel where a character says, **“Children begin by loving their parents; as they grow older they judge them; sometimes they forgive them.”**<sup>1</sup> How do adult children move from judging their parents to forgiving them so they might enjoy a good relationship?
    - And there is a great need for peacemaking within the church. We are family and brothers and sisters often get into fights. It is not easy to forgive each other. As C.S. Lewis has so rightly observed, **“Everyone says forgiveness is a lovely idea, until they have something to forgive.”**<sup>2</sup>
- This is where the little letter of Philemon is of such great help. This letter is a case scenario in peacemaking. Let me remind you of what is happening here.
- Years earlier Paul had led a man named Philemon to Christ. Philemon hosted the church in Colossae at his house and was probably a leader in it. Like all people with a bit of wealth Philemon owned at least one slave. His name was Onesimus. Even as a slave Onesimus wasn’t very useful. Then one day Onesimus ran away and it seems he stole some of Philemon’s money or possessions as he fled. In the providence of God, Onesimus met Paul who was in prison in Rome. Through Paul, Onesimus became a Christian. Not only that, he cared for Paul and partnered in the gospel work with him.
  - But Paul knew that there needed to be reconciliation between Philemon and Onesimus. You see the gospel of Jesus Christ is not just about reconciling sinners with God. It is also about reconciling brothers and sisters in Christ with each other.
    - And so Paul wrote two letters – one to the church in Colossae, which we call the book of Colossians. The second letter he wrote to Philemon himself. In this letter he appeals to Philemon to forgive Onesimus and to free him that he might serve with Paul. Paul then sent the two letters back to Colossae with Philemon and a man named Tychicus.
- This short letter to Philemon is a masterpiece of peacemaking. Paul tries to build a bridge over the rift between these two Christian brothers. Some sermons are broad and apply to many situations. This is not one of those messages. In this message I am calling you, in your unique circle of influence, to be a peacemaker, to build bridges, between Christians who are at odds with each other.
  - Now as we said last week, you should not interfere in other people’s conflicts when you have no place to do so. But when like Paul you are well positioned between two Christians who are at odds with each other, then you are called to be a peacemaker.
    - So how do we do this? How do we make peace? Today we see five ways to build bridges between quarreling Christians. Five ways to be a peacemaker.

**APPEALING TO THEM THROUGH LOVE NOT COERCION**

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<sup>1</sup> Oscar Wilde, *A Picture of Dorian Gray*, Kindle Edition, Location 971.

<sup>2</sup> C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, Kindle Edition, Location 1502.

- (SHOW SLIDE 2) First, when two Christians are in conflict, a peacemaker appeals to them through love not coercion.
  - Look at verses 8-9. **READ 8-9** - <sup>8</sup> *Accordingly, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do what is required, <sup>9</sup> yet for love's sake I prefer to appeal to you—I, Paul, an old man and now a prisoner also for Christ Jesus—*
    - Paul is an apostle. He could have just ordered Philemon to forgive Onesimus and let him go. But he didn't. If he had done that he would have validated the coercion that is inherent within the system of slavery.
- One commentator writes, ***“Slavery is a system of bossing people around. If Paul had bossed Philemon, the slavemaster might submit and grudgingly free Onesimus but the principle of domination would still be intact. And slavery would spring up again inside the church, in more ways than one. Instead, Paul subverts the entire system of domination by appealing to Philemon's free decision, to act in a manner consistent with the equality and love between brothers and sisters in Christ.”***<sup>3</sup>
  - What Paul is doing here is letting the gospel work itself out within the church community at Colossae. What he wants is willing Christ-motivated action, not coerced action. Every parent understands this. When your son says something that hurts your daughter, you can command your son to apologize and reconcile. He may even obey but it is a begrudging obedience and a surface level reconciliation.
    - But if you appeal to your son out of love—if you say, “This is your sister. We are part of the same family” and he listens to your appeal—then his apology comes from the heart. The reconciliation is deep.
- What an example of peacemaking Paul is to us here. When two Christians are at odds we do not command, we appeal.
  - This word ‘appeal’ is the same one Paul uses in Philippians 4:2 where two Christian women, Euodia and Syntyche, are at odds with each other. Paul says, ***“I plead with Euodia and I plead with Syntyche to agree with each other in the Lord.”***
    - In Philippians it is two women. In Philemon it is two men.
- And when we appeal we do so for love's sake. **READ 9a** - <sup>9</sup> *yet for love's sake I prefer to appeal to you.* Oh what an important point this is! As Christians we usually tend in one of two directions. Some Christians think that being a peacemaker means ignoring difficult issues, never speaking up when something is wrong, avoiding conflict, and appeasing people. But that is false peace.
  - As a pastor I see this all the time. Christians come to church and after awhile they have some conflict with someone else in the church. At that point there is a marvelous opportunity for the gospel to work but what so often happens is they just leave. They avoid the other Christian and go to another church. But what good is the gospel in your life if you don't apply it in this most basic area of conflict with another Christian? You speak of how God reconciled you to himself and yet you deny reconciliation to your brother or sister. This should not be so. Love does not avoid conflict. Paul does not say, ***“Philemon, for love's sake I am not just going to avoid this issue.”***
    - Love acts. When we were enemies with God he did not avoid the conflict. He entered into it and made peace with us through Jesus.
- Some Christians may avoid conflict but other Christians have the opposite problem. James MacDonald, whom I am borrowing a few of thoughts from, talks about the ‘brutality of rightness.’ These Christians will engage everything because they believe they have the truth and are right.
  - But listen, you can be entirely right in your view of the conflict but you can utterly fail because you are brutal with the truth. But look at Paul. He is right but he does not command.

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<sup>3</sup> Paul K. Jewett, *Paul, The Apostle to America*, 68.

- As we saw last week he speaks of all the good in Philemon, he prays for him, he verbally expresses his love for him, and now he says, ***“Philemon, for love’s sake I want to make an appeal to you.”***
- So to act as a peacemaker means to appeal out of love. It means to get between two quarrelling Christians and appeal gently. You build a bridge by appealing out of love.

## REMINDING THEM THAT GOD CAN TRANSFORM PEOPLE

- **(SHOW SLIDE 3)** Second, **when two Christians are in conflict, a peacemaker reminds them that God can transform people.**
  - Look at how Paul tells Philemon about how much God has changed Onesimus. Look at verses 10. ***READ 10 - <sup>10</sup>I appeal to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I became in my imprisonment.***
    - Paul calls Onesimus his ‘child.’ He says he became a father while he was in chains. This is spiritual imagery to say that while he was in prison he led Onesimus to Christ. Jesus has changed Onesimus and Onesimus is now ready to make things right with Philemon.
- In verse 11 Paul eases the tension a bit by using some wit and humour but it is also designed to show that God has transformed Onesimus. ***READ 11 - (Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful to you and to me.)***
  - Onesimus’ name means ‘useful.’ It seems that Onesimus was not a very good slave. He was useless. But Paul insists that the man returning to Colossae is a different man. Jesus has changed him. He who was useless and has now become his name, “Useful.”
    - There is another level to Paul’s witty comment. The word ‘useless’ is ‘achrestos.’ This sounds very similar to the word “achristos,” which means ‘Christless.’ So putting it all together, Onesimus was not useful before he became he was without Christ. But since Onesimus now has Christ, he is useful.
- Do you see what Paul, the peacemaker, is doing here? Before addressing the issue itself Paul wants Philemon to remember something critical – that God can transform people. This is a critical foundation to remember in peacemaking.
  - You see, you know that when you are in conflict with someone else all you can see is their faults. Their faults are so large they blind you to everything else about them. We stop believing the best about them and we assume the worst about them.
- A peacemaker remembers the gospel – that God is at work to change all of us into the image of Jesus. A peacemaker reminds those in conflict of this truth.
  - Don’t you want others to believe this about you? Are you the same person you were ten years ago? Do you believe that God can change the people who are in conflict with you? Do you really believe it?
    - A peacemaker echoes Paul in Philippians 1:6 when he says he is confident that ***“he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.”***
      - When two Christians are in conflict, a peacemaker reminds them that God can transform people.

## PUSHING THEM TO RECONCILING ACTION

- **(SHOW SLIDE 4)** Third, **when two Christians are in conflict, a peacemaker calls them to concrete actions of reconciliation.**
  - Peace does not just happen because we wish for it or even pray for it. Just as God acted in sending Christ for us, we are called to take action in order to make peace. Notice first that Paul sends Onesimus back to Colossae.
    - ***READ 12 - I am sending him back to you, sending my very heart.***
- Can you imagine when Philemon and Tychicus showed up in Colossae? Social media must have blown up. Instagram pictures of them walking through town with captions that said, ***“Can’t believe my eyes –***

**just saw Onesimus walk back into town.”** Did Onesimus stand around the corner of Philemon’s house while Tychicus gave the letters to Philemon? What was it like for Philemon to read this letter for the first time?

- He opens it up and reads in verse 1 that it is from Paul. **“Paul wrote me a letter! The apostle Paul wrote me a letter.” “Oh, he is still in prison. Too bad. We’ll have to keep praying.”** And then Paul greets Philemon’s family and the church.
  - In verse 4 he reads, **READ 4 - I thank my God always when I remember you in my prayers. “Wow, Paul prays for me and he thinks I am on the right track. This is the best letter ever!”** Then he gets to verse 6 where Paul says he is asking God for Philemon to be more active in partnering in the faith and loving other believers.” **“Hm, that is a little cryptic. I wonder what he means by that?”**
- But then he reads verse 7 where Paul says, **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.**
  - He must have called his wife: **“You have got to read this. Paul, the apostle Paul, says I have given him great joy.”**
- Then he reads verse 8. **READ 8 - <sup>8</sup>Accordingly, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do what is required,**
  - **“Hm this is a little strange. He wants to ask me to do something. I wonder what Paul wants.”**
- He gets to verse 10. **READ 10 - I appeal to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I became in my imprisonment.**
  - **“Onesimus?! How did he meet Paul? He’s a Christian now?”**
- He keeps reading. **READ 11a - (Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful to you and to me.)**
  - **“You don’t know the half of it Paul.”** And then he reads verse 12. **READ 12 - I am sending him back to you, sending my very heart.**
    - **“What?! Onesimus is here?”** And then I imagine Onesimus walking in the room. What a moment! Imagine the tension in the air. Awkward!
- Now here is the principle. It was not enough for Onesimus just to seek God’s forgiveness for what he had done. He had to make things right with Philemon. And so Paul, as the peacemaker, sends him back to Philemon.
  - It is the same for us. It is not enough to just ask God’s forgiveness for the things you do wrong. You need to the best of your abilities make things right with people.
    - You cannot be right with God while you are not right with other people. Jesus said, **“Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift.”**
- If you are here today because you’re trying to escape relational problems in another church then go back and make things right. If you want to come to Central then fine but first make things right.
  - Do you have relationships that have been broken in the past? Make them right.
    - Have you created conflict because you owe someone money but you haven’t paid it back? Then go and pay it back.
- Now it is right here that we need to deal with a very important question. After the service last week someone came up and asked me, **“What do you do if you’ve tried to make peace but the other person simply won’t make peace with you?”**
  - There is one verse in the New Testament that answers this perfectly. It is Romans 12:18: **“If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.”**
    - Two things are said here. First, you must take action to make peace. As far as it depends on you, you are called to make peace. So the first thing to ask yourself is this: **“have I really done everything in my power to make peace or am I just a conflict avoider? Have I truly apologized? Is there anything else I can do?”** If not, then go and take the necessary steps.

- However, in the second place notice that this verse does not say, ***“Live at peace with all men.”*** I am so glad it does not say that for who could achieve it? No. Paul assumes that there are situations where no matter what you do, the other party will refuse to reconcile with you for Paul says, ***“if it is possible...live at peace with all men.”***
  - So if you have truly done all you can to make peace but the other party simply will not respond in kind, then this verse should free your conscience. Wait for a period of time. As time passes there may be another opportunity to make peace.
    - So let me ask you, are there areas in your own life where you need to take action towards reconciliation? If you are acting as the bridge builder between two other Christians what actions can you encourage them to take to make peace?
      - When two Christians are in conflict, a peacemaker calls them to concrete actions of reconciliation.

## WILLING TO SACRIFICE FOR THE GOOD OF RECONCILIATION

- (SHOW SLIDE 5) Fourth, **when two Christians are in conflict, a peacemaker is willing to sacrifice for the good of reconciliation.**
  - **READ 13-14** - <sup>13</sup> *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,* <sup>14</sup> *but I preferred to do nothing without your consent in order that your goodness might not be by compulsion but of your own accord.*
    - Clearly Paul wanted to keep Onesimus. He needed him far more than Philemon did. But Paul sacrificed his own good because he knew how important reconciliation is to God.
- If you know two Christians who are in conflict you are called to be a bridge builder. Most of us do not do this because we are friends with both of them or are related to them. ***“I get along with them both so why would I jeopardize that? If they cannot figure out their issues then that is there problem. I don’t want to get involved.”***
  - It sure is good that God doesn’t think like this. For when you were God’s enemy, God sent his Son down into the middle of the conflict. He got involved. Jesus had to sacrifice his very life in order to bring reconciliation.
    - Friends, when we live for Christ, reconciliation becomes higher than friendship. At times you may have to risk sacrificing your friendships because you appeal to people to reconcile. This does not always turn out well.
- I worked as a Resident Director at Trinity Western University for four years I remember a mediation session where I tried to help two warring roommates make peace. They both liked me when we went into the session. But one of the guys turned on us both during the session. He started yelling and said, ***“I am an only child. Yes, I am selfish. But that is the way I am so too bad.”*** That situation did not turn out well. My relationship with that guy was never the same.
  - But it was worth the effort to see peace. When two Christians are in conflict, a peacemaker is willing to sacrifice for the good of reconciliation.

## POINTING THEM TO A SOVEREIGN PURPOSE

- (SHOW SLIDE 6) Fifth, **when two Christians are in conflict, a peacemaker points them to God’s sovereignty in their conflict.**
  - Philemon would have been shocked to read this letter. Onesimus is a Christian? Onesimus has returned? Look what Paul says in verse 15.
    - **READ 15** - *For this perhaps is why he was parted from you for a while, that you might have him back forever.*
- When Paul says, ***“he was parted”*** it indicates that God is the agent behind these events. Here Paul suggests a reason for why God may have caused all this to come to pass. God’s hand is providentially guiding this whole situation.

- It reminds us of Joseph's story. He was sold into slavery by his brothers but eventually became second in command in Egypt. He used his power to save millions from starvation. At the end Joseph says to his brothers, ***"it was not you who sent me here, but God."***
  - Paul is suggesting to Philemon that God had a purpose behind all this. What was that purpose? ***READ 16 - <sup>16</sup>no longer as a bondservant but more than a bondservant, as a beloved brother—especially to me, but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord.***
- God's purpose will not be complete until Onesimus is no longer a slave but a dear brother. There is a new relationship between them. He is no longer a possession or a piece of property. He is a brother.
  - Do you see then how Paul deals with slavery? He does not attack it head on. Paul is not writing a letter to the Roman Emperor. He is writing a letter to a friend and brother. And so he is subversive in a good sense. You see, as Philemon views Onesimus as a brother, as part of the same family of God, it will break down the master and slave relationship.
    - This verse is like a seed that Paul plants under the concrete sidewalk of slavery. As the seed of the gospel grows inside Philemon, as relationships in the church are redefined in terms of the family of God, then the seed sprouts roots that will break up through the concrete.
- In our peacemaking we need to remind people that through their conflict God is working out God's larger purpose. One of the greatest purposes of conflict is to shape us, to break down our sin, to make us humble, to learn how to love.
  - When two Christians are in conflict, a peacemaker points them to God's sovereign purpose in conflict.

## CONCLUSION

- Do you know some Christians who are in conflict? How will you build a bridge between them? How will you act as a peacemaker? Perhaps you are the one in conflict. How will you go about making peace?
  - Remember the book of Philemon is not so much about getting the gospel right. It is about getting your relationships right in light of the gospel. The gospel message is the good news that although you were alienated from God because of your sin God reconciles back to himself all those who trust in Jesus Christ. Let that message shape every part of you. Let it work into your relationships.
    - Be an agent of reconciliation.