

Small Books, Big Messages

“The Road to Reconciliation – Part 3”

Philemon 17-25

~ Delivered at Central Baptist Church on August 12, 2018 by Pastor Barton Priebe

INTRODUCTION

- **(SHOW SLIDE 1)** I was about 450 years ago that Charles V stepped down as the Holy Roman Emperor. He then spent much of his time at his palace in Spain. He had six clocks there but, no matter how hard he tried, he could never get them to chime together on the hour. His frustration with the clocks reminded him of the six nations of the Empire.
 - In his memoirs he wrote, **“How is it impossible for six different clocks to chime all at the same time? How is it even more impossible for the six nations of the Holy Roman Empire to live in harmony? It can’t be done. It’s impossible, even if they call themselves Christians.”**
- It is no secret that Christians often find it difficult to live in unity together. Christian marriages fail at an alarming rate. Church leaders are often found quarrelling with each other. Churches often split over personality conflicts. Even the strongest Christian families have tensions and rifts.
 - Into all of this dissonance come the words of Jesus. **“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God.”** Jesus says that one of the greatest evidences that you really are a son or daughter of your Father in heaven is that you are a peacemaker. Not a peace lover. Not a peace admirer. A peacemaker. A peacemaker helps others to chime together in unison.
 - But how do we do this? This is where the book of Philemon is so helpful for here we have a case scenario on peacemaking. Let me remind you what is going on here.
- Paul had led Philemon to Jesus. Philemon was a leader in the church in Colossae. Like all people with a bit of wealth Philemon owned at least one slave. His name was Onesimus. One day Onesimus ran away and 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 people with each other. And so Paul told Onesimus he would help him with this. Paul wrote a letter to Philemon calling Philemon to forgive and free Onesimus.
 - He then sent that letter back to Colossae with Onesimus.
- This short letter to Philemon is a shining example of peacemaking. Paul tries to help two clocks that are out of sync to chime together. And that is what I am trying to get you to do.
 - Do you know two Christians who are at odds? Who comes to your mind right now? If, like Paul, you are well positioned between these two people then you are called to be a peacemaker between them.
 - So how do you do this? Today we see six ways to be a peacemaker. Six ways to help Christians chime together.

A PEACEMAKER ACTS AS A MEDIATOR

- **(SHOW SLIDE 2)** First, **when two Christians are at odds, a peacemaker acts as a mediator.**
 - When it comes to conflict we usually avoid it. We don’t want to get in the middle of things. But a peacemaker gets in the middle and acts as a mediator. Look at what Paul says in

verse 17. **READ 17a - So if you consider me your partner.** This word “partner” comes from the business world. It is a mutual partnership, a shared business venture.

- So Paul challenges Philemon. **“Philemon, do you still think of me as your partner? Are we still equals? Do you still think of me as being on the same team as you?”**

➤ Imagine Philemon sitting at the table reading these words. He would have said to himself, **“Of course Paul. You know how much we worked together in the past. You know how highly I regard you. Paul you even said in verse 7 that my love has given you great joy and encouragement because I partner with you in ministering to other Christians.”**

- And then Paul drops the bomb. **READ 17b - So if you consider me your partner, receive him as you would receive me.** So Paul is saying, **“Philemon, accept Onesimus as if he were me. Philemon, you know that if it was me showing up at your door you could give me one of those guy hugs where we slap each other backs. Do that for Onesimus. If it was me visiting you would have taken me to the Keg for supper. So take Onesimus out and get him that great steak and crab deal they have going right now. Philemon, if you think of me as a partner then welcome Onesimus as you would welcome me. Accept him based on my merit with you. Be right with him as I am right with you.”**

➤ Do you see here that Paul is simply living out the gospel? For the gospel, or good news, is that out of love the Father sent the Son to die in our place. The Son obeyed and then sats to the Father, **“receive Barton, as you would receive me.”** Like Onesimus I have nothing in me that should allow God to receive me. I have sinned. But the good news is that like Philemon should receive Onesimus on the merits of another, God receives us on the merits of another. We are received on the basis of what Jesus has done for us. Jesus is our mediator.

- Here is the point – like Paul we should be so captivated by this good news that we act as a mediator between other people. Since Jesus has acted as your mediator before God can you not act as a mediator between two people who are not chiming together?

➤ Now one way that many Christians try to avoid all of this is to say, **“we are not to judge.”** If there is one verse that everyone knows it is Jesus’ words, **“Judge not, lest you be judged.”** When people quote this they are saying you have no right to make a judgement about how I live my life. If that is what Jesus is saying then we cannot act as mediators because this requires us to make judgement calls.

- But that is clearly not what Jesus is saying. For he goes on to tell us that we are to take the speck out of our brother’s eye. But when we do so we are first to examine ourselves and take the plank out of our own eye. So Jesus is teaching us how to judge rightly.

- He is saying, **“When you correct others don’t do it with a smug, judgmental attitude of moral superiority.”** Be humble. Be gracious. Recognize that you also need grace. Once you have done this then help your brother take the speck out of his eye.

➤ So Christian, do not avoid being a peacemaker. Oh yes it is not easy. It can be messy. But God became a man and got down into the middle of the mess. Jesus is our mediator. So this is the first point: when two Christians are at odds, a peacemaker acts a mediator.

A PEACEMAKER ENSURES ALL DEBTS ARE SETTLED

➤ **(SHOW SLIDE 3)** Second, **when two Christians are at odds, a peacemaker ensures all debts are settled.**

- Before Philemon can take Onesimus back as a partner there are some outstanding debts that need to be settled. Whenever Christians are at odds there is always some debt. A peacemaker ensures it is settled.
 - Look at verse 18. **READ 18a - If he has wronged you at all, or owes you anything.**
- This suggests that when Onesimus ran away he probably stole some money or possessions. Roman society expected brutal punishment for such actions, sometimes even death. But Paul says in the second half of verse 18. **READ 18b - charge that to my account.**
 - In modern terms Paul says, **“Bill me. I’ll cover it from my pocket.”** This is an astounding pledge and reveals Paul’s great love for Onesimus.
 - And then in verse 19 he says, **READ 19a - I, Paul, write this with my own hand: I will repay it—to say nothing of your owing me even your own self.**
 - Paul would have been dictating this letter but at this point he picked up the pen himself and wrote his name. Why does he do this? It is the same as our society. A written and signed statement carries legal validity. This is a promissory note.
 - This again is a marvelous picture of the gospel. Jesus found us as runaway slaves, as lawbreakers of God who owed an infinite debt for our sin. Since we could not pay that debt we all stand under the judgement of death. But out of love for us Jesus went to the cross. On the cross he paid our debt. How? Theologians call it ‘imputation.’ To impute means to ‘transfer to another’s account.’ Although Jesus committed no sin he said to the Father, **“Charge their sins to me.”** With our sins imputed to Jesus, he paid the penalty we deserved to pay. As a result, the ledger book of your sins has written over every page, **“Paid in full.”**
 - Oh what love from God the Father who planned all of this and gave up his Son. Oh what love from God the Son who paid our debt and so stands before the Father and says, **“Barton no longer owes You a debt because I paid it fully on the cross. Receive him as You would receive Me.”** And the Father says, **“Welcome my son. Welcome my daughter.”**
 - You see Paul has been so transformed by what Jesus has done that he takes on Onesimus’ debt in order to see reconciliation take place.
 - Whenever you are acting as a peacemaker there will always be debts to settle. Some are emotional. People have been hurt by words. Emotional debts need to at least be settled with apologies. Do you need to apologize to someone?
 - But many times there are financial debts that cause conflicts. A peacemaker ensures these are settled. Do you have any financial debts that need to be settled so you can be at peace with someone?
 - Whatever debt needs to be paid, make sure it is paid in full for this is what Christ did for you. When two Christians are at odds, a peacemaker ensures all debts are settled.

A PEACEMAKER CALLS FOR RECONCILIATION

- **(SHOW SLIDE 4)** Third, **when two Christians are at odds, a peacemaker calls for reconciliation.**
 - It is not enough for a peacemaker just to love people. A peacemaker must call for action. That is what Paul does now but still with great tact.
- **READ 19b - I, Paul, write this with my own hand: I will repay it—to say nothing of your owing me even your own self.** After saying that he will pay Onesimus’ debt Paul reminds Philemon that he owes Paul his very life. It was Paul who had led Philemon to Christ. Philemon owes Paul a great debt of love.

- Oh what a great debt we owe to those people who showed us the good news. My parents, I owe you my very self because you showed me Christ. And my parents and I both owe my grandparents our very self for showing us Christ. Who are those people God put in your life to show you himself. Oh, what a great debt of love we owe to them.
- In light of this Paul says in verse 20, **READ 20** - *Yes, brother, I want some benefit from you in the Lord. Refresh my heart in Christ.* So Paul says, *“Yes, I will pay Onesimus’ debt. But don’t forget what a debt you owe me Philemon. But now that I think of it, I do want some return from you.”* What does Paul want?
 - Again, Paul uses wit and pun to make a point. The word for “benefit” is “*onaimen*.” This word of course sounds just like Onesimus. Brilliant. *“Philemon it is now your turn to onaimen/benefit me and the onaimen I want from you is Onesimus.”*
 - And then remember back in verse 7 Paul praised Philemon because he says *“the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you.”* Now Paul says, *“Philemon, I am asking you to refresh my heart as you refresh the hearts of the saints.”* What a tactful way to call for reconciliation.
- Then look at verse 21. **READ 21** - *Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say.*
 - Paul knows Philemon’s character. In writing that he will do more than he asks Paul is suggesting Onesimus be set free from enslavement that he may work with Paul. Paul calls for action. He says Philemon will ‘do’ more than he asks. Talk is not enough. There must be action.
 - So as a peacemaker we must call people to action. Peacemaking involves calling people to action steps. This leads straight into the fourth point.

A PEACEMAKER BRINGS THE ISSUE UNDER CHRIST’S LORDSHIP

- (SHOW SLIDE 5) Fourth, **when two Christians are at odds, a peacemaker puts the issue under Christ’s Lordship.**
 - Look again at verse 20. **READ 20** - *Yes, brother, I want some benefit from you in the Lord.* This whole issue is about what is right in the Lord. You see Christianity is not merely a set of principles for how to live a good life. It is first of all news. It is news about what God has done for us in Jesus. The news is that rather than leave us estranged from himself, God sent Jesus to die for our sins that we might be reconciled back to God.
 - This news of what God has done then impacts how we live. So Paul says, *“Philemon, the quarrel between you and Onesimus must be worked out in light of the news of what God has done for us in Jesus. Since Jesus reconciled you to God and He is your Lord, you need to reconcile with Onesimus.”*
- And yet I meet so many Christians who refuse to reconcile with each other. They have all kinds of excuses. Some use the excuse of *mysticism*. They say, *“I just don’t feel the Holy Spirit leading me to reconcile.”*
 - If a person says that ask them this question: do you think the Holy Spirit contradicts himself? 2 Peter 1:21 tells us that it was the Holy Spirit who inspired the writers of scripture.
- And what does the Holy Spirit inspired scriptures say? Romans 12:14: *“If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.”* Colossians 3:13: *“Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you.”*

- Don't let people avoid reconciliation because of mysticism. The Holy Spirit has made himself abundantly clear on this issue.
- Others Christians use the excuse of *prayer*. They say, ***“Well I prayed about it and I don't feel God wants me to do this.”***
 - Let me pass on some advice that I heard from another pastor. When someone says this you say, ***“O.K., let's pray right now. I'll go first. Heavenly Father, we need your help. We know your Bible says we are to forgive and reconcile but we are wondering if you lied. Lord, are you a liar? Oh Lord, we need your guidance.”*** Then open your eyes and say, ***“Alright, your turn. You pray.”***
 - Don't avoid reconciliation.
- Other Christians use the excuse of *busyness* to avoid reconciliation. ***“I will get to it but I am just too busy right now. Maybe later.”*** Here's what you say to that. ***“Let me get this straight. You are too busy to do what is at the very heart of God? It is sure a good thing God did not say that about you when you were in your sins.”***
 - Reconciliation is at the very heart of God. Whatever you are so busy with, it is nowhere near as important as reconciliation. Put aside everything else in order to make things right.
 - A peacemaker puts the issue back where it belongs - under Christ's Lordship.

A PEACEMAKER HOLD THEM ACCOUNTABLE TO RECONCILING ACTION

- (SHOW SLIDE 6) Fifth, when two Christians are at odds, a peacemaker holds them accountable to reconciling action.
 - Look at verse 22. ***READ 22 - At the same time, prepare a guest room for me, for I am hoping that through your prayers I will be graciously given to you.*** Paul is applying a bit of pressure here. ***“Oh by the way Philemon, I know you have been praying for my release. I expect it will happen soon. Once I am free I am coming to see you.”***
 - Paul is obviously implying that he hopes to come and see the fruit of reconciliation.
- And then don't pass over verses 23-24. Paul is passing on greetings here but I think these greetings also add to the sense of accountability. ***READ 23 - Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends greetings to you.*** In Colossians 1 we learn that Epaphras was the one who planted the church in Colossae. He was the original pastor in the church where Philemon is presently a leader. So Paul is saying, ***“Your old lead pastor is here with me. He passes on greetings to you.”*** In mentioning Epaphras Paul adds further accountability.
 - And then in verse 24, ***READ 24 - and so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke, my fellow workers.*** This is so great that he includes Mark in this. If you have read the book of Acts you know that years earlier Paul and Barnabas had such a sharp disagreement with each other that they had gone their separate ways. The disagreement was over Mark. Mark had abandoned them on one their mission trips. Paul, therefore, did not want to take this unreliable man with them again but Barnabas did. In other words, Paul and Mark were quarrelling with each other.
 - But here in Philemon, Mark is with Paul. They have been reconciled. In mentioning Mark, Paul is saying, ***“Philemon, I understand how difficult reconciliation is. I have reconciled with Mark and now the two of us want to see what you will do.”***
- Then Paul mentions a few others. He is saying, ***“Philemon, we are all here watching you and cheering you on. I'll be there soon. So take action and reconcile.”***

- So many Christians will see their other Christian friends in conflict and just avoid it. They all go on pretending that they love God, despite the sin in their lives. But faithful Christian friends hold each other accountable.
 - They say, ***“I love you so much that I am going to graciously tell you that you are wrong.”*** A real friend says, ***“I won’t let you get eaten up with bitterness and anger. I will risk even our friendship to push you towards reconciliation.”***
- You see, friendship is not the supreme thing. Christ is. And if we are seeking to live for Christ then we will not step aside when a Christian friend is refusing to reconcile. Proverbs says, ***“The wounds of a friend can be trusted.”***
 - Do you have Christian friends who love you so much they will wound you? Will you love your Christian friends enough to wound them?
 - When two Christians are at odds, a peacemaker holds them accountable to reconciling action.

A PEACEMAKER PRAYS FOR MORE GRACE

- (SHOW SLIDE 7) Sixth, **when two Christians are at odds, a peacemaker prays for more grace.**
 - **READ 25 - *The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.*** We come now to the end of the letter. But once again I remind you not to pass so quickly over these last words. In every single one of Paul’s letters he ends with some form of ‘grace to you.’
 - This is critical. Paul has called Philemon to do some difficult things. And Paul knows that Philemon will need God to pour out grace on his spirit that he might have the heart to obey. And so just as he began with a prayer for grace, he ends with a prayer for grace.
- Whether you are trying to be a peacemaker between two others or in your own life this is what you need. We never move past our need for God’s grace to help us. You never arrive at a place in dealing with conflict when you can say, ***“I have made it and can handle it from here God”***. No, the Christian life is always one great cry for help.
 - ***“Help me reconcile with my parents, help me reconcile with my sibling, help my brother reconcile with my parents, help me be a peacemaker in my church, help me be a peacemaker in my family. Help me to speak truth but in a way that is loving. Help my heart and theirs to be soft. Help our hearts to escape bitterness and anger. Help, help, help, help!”***
 - This cry for help is a cry for grace. It is a cry for God to do for us what we do not deserve. It is a cry for God’s favour in the situation. This is where peacemaking begins and ends. A peacemaker prays for more and more and more grace.

CONCLUSION

- So that is the book of Philemon. What will you do this this? How is God calling you to be a peacemaker? Wherever he is asking you to do this, do it. Start today. ***“Blessed are the peacemakers for they will be called sons of God.”***