

Philemon: A Story of Reconciliation

Sooner or later most of us experience conflict with other believers. It is simply part of life in this broken world. Many times such conflict is brief and not all that difficult to work through. At other times the hurt and pain is so deep that the work necessary to bring such a relationship together again can be significant. But this is what the Gospel offers and demands – reconciliation. Philemon gives us a chance to see how the Apostle Paul applied the Gospel to a relational conflict between two believers – Philemon and Onesimus. It is a story of reconciliation that can help us as we seek to do the hard work of reconciliation in our own lives.

Opening Question: What one word or phrase would you use to describe how conflict was handled in your family as you were growing up?

Read Philemon

1. Who are the chief characters involved in this letter? How would you describe the nature of their relationships?
2. If this letter is a personal appeal to Philemon, why does Paul address it to others as well (v. 2)?
3. How would you sum up what is Paul seeking?
4. How did Paul approach Philemon? What was his tone and attitude?
5. To what level was Paul willing to get involved in the reconciliation between Philemon and Onesimus?
6. Look at Paul's appeal to Philemon in verse 17. What will it take for Philemon to do that?

7. What will it take on Onesimus' part to be reconciled to Philemon?

8. What insights does this short letter offer you as you consider pursuing reconciliation with someone you've wronged, or someone who has wronged you? What principles can be drawn?

9. What principles do we learn from this letter about how we can serve in the role of peace-maker between others who are in conflict?

Sam said:

Reconciliation between flawed, sinful human beings is rarely a one-way street. It's so easy to do hurtful things, say hurtful words, and drive seemingly eternal, immovable wedges between one another. The rather blunt message we find in Philemon is this: do the hard work of reconciliation. Don't shy away from it. Go and face the person or people involved, and together everyone must move toward the Gospel. We're not smart enough or kind enough to heal these relationships on our own. We must pursue reconciliation on the basis of love and before our Savior who has taught us how to heal and be healed.

10. Without naming names, is there someone with whom you need to do the "hard work of reconciliation?" As best you understand right now, what would it look like to pursue reconciliation on the basis of love?

Note about slavery from Sam's sermon: How can it be that a Christian was allowed to own a slave? Slavery in the Roman Empire was a system largely based on status, economy, and power. There were a number of ways someone could become a slave including being born as one, being captured in war, and selling one's self into service in order to work off a debt. The life of a Roman slave was certainly hard and often times filled with violence and abuse, but some were treated well, worked regular jobs, and could achieve a decent quality of life. It (slavery) was also not necessarily permanent. The Romans had legal ways a slave could pursue their freedom, and many did by the age of 30, though it was nearly impossible for them to shake of the reputation and lowly status of having been a slave in the first place. Roman slavery was a great deal unlike the slavery of early America. That system was largely based on race, a result of kidnapping and brutal subjugation, and was lifelong. I do not want to go as far as to say the Roman system was better or somehow more moral than that of early America, but it did leave room for the possibility that Roman citizens who had become believers might retain their slaves and treat them well according to the teachings of Paul in such places as 1 Corinthians 7:21-23. (Note that Paul did not encourage either owning or becoming a slave. As we see from this text, he actually encouraged care and love be brought into what would have been typically careless and loveless relationship between slave and slave owner).