

Radical Reconciliation

Philemon 1:1-25

My name is Aaron Webb. I have the privilege of serving as the young couple's pastor here. We'll be studying through the book of Philemon this evening. This is perhaps one of the most unique letters and books in all of the New Testament, for a few different reasons. First, it's written to one particular individual and he's not a pastor. Another thing is that Philemon was a man who hosted a church in his house. In fact, this is the Colossian church that is hosted in his house. And in addition, he is a man who Paul is speaking to directly, to ask him to forgive a man who might seem to him unforgivable. Philemon. As many wealthy people in that day owned slaves, servants who would help around the house, or maybe with agricultural endeavors or in business matters or a variety of different ways. But this particular slave Onesimus, whose name means useful, ran away from his master. We're not told exactly why, but it does seem that he probably stole some sort of property, or even stole some of Philemon's money and ran away and hides in the large city of Rome and seeks out Paul, who is in chains in prison for the gospel of Jesus Christ, and asks him for help. And Paul, being a really good missionary doesn't just solve his issue. He shares the gospel with him. Onesimus becomes a Christian. Miraculously. And then Paul, both because there needs to be reconciliation, and also because it is illegal to harbor criminals in that Greco-Roman world. Paul drafts this letter and sends it with Onesimus to Philemon and calls for him to forgive him, not just in the flesh, but also in the Lord. But underlying this entire letter, although it be short, is one question how does the good news of Jesus, the gospel? How does it not only impact and transform our relationship with God, but also with one another? Would you stand as we read an entire book of the Bible together.

Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus, and Timothy, our brother to Philemon, our beloved fellow worker, and Apphia, our sister and Archippus, our fellow soldier and the church in your house. Grace to you and peace from God our father and the Lord Jesus Christ. I thank my God always when I remember you in my prayers, because I hear of your love and of the faith that you have toward the Lord Jesus and for all the saints. 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. For I have derived much joy and comfort from your love, my brother, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you. Accordingly, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do what is required. Yet for love's sake I prefer to appeal to you. I, Paul, an old man, and now a prisoner also for Christ Jesus. I appeal to you for my child Onesimus, whose father I became in my imprisonment. Formerly he was useless to you. But now he is indeed useful to you and to me. I am sending him back to you, sending my very heart. 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. But I preferred to do nothing without your consent, in order that your goodness might not be by compulsion, but of your own accord. For this, perhaps, is why he was parted from you for a while, that you might have him back forever. 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? So if you consider me your partner, receive him as you would receive me. If he has wronged you at all or owes you anything, charge that to my account. I, Paul, write this with my own hand. I will repay it to say nothing of your owing me, even your own self. Yes, brother. I want some benefit from you in the Lord. Refresh my heart in Christ. Confident of your obedience, I write to you knowing that you will do even more than I say. 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. A path for us, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus sends greetings to you, and so do Mark, our starkest, Demas and Luke, my fellow workers. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.

This is the word of the Lord. So how does the good news of Jesus Christ transform our relationships? Well, first thing is that we are called to pray for and to encourage one another. Look there in verses four through seven he says, I thank my God always when I remember you in my prayers, because I hear of your love and of the faith that you have toward the Lord Jesus and for all the saints. You know, something happens to you and I when we become Christians, and it continues on in our life to varying degrees, especially as we walk in step with the spirit. You and I are transformed to now love and be attracted to, in love towards our brother and our sisters in Christ. Philemon's heart was not only transformed for the Lord, but also for his brother. But typically, what happens, you and I, if we're honest, we become so focused on the mini kingdoms that we build. We forget about God's kingdom. You and I. So often our idols are so at play. Like James four talks about that we distrust one another and it's hard to see is Jesus really working in you like he's working in me? And yet, as a pastor, friend of mine would say, Jesus would speak to us a better word that Jesus, as He opens our spiritual eyes, he's not just at work in us, but he's at work in those around us. And if we would open those spiritual eyes and take a look around us, we would understand that we have this incredible privilege and responsibility, not just to be concerned with my own sanctification, but in the best possible way to be totally consumed with yours as well. That I would want to pray for you, big prayers and encourage you. I think often of a swimming pool example, we were me and my family were swimming at a friend's pool just a couple of weeks ago, and my sons are swimming with me and I am the stronger of the swimmer. But also I'm. It's like a four foot pool. So I'm doing pretty good standing on two legs. And you know how when you've got someone who's not a great swimmer. What are they typically do if they're drowning? They grab all over your face and are trying to pull you down. Right? And in some ways, I can just pick him up and say, hey, man, it's okay. For one, I'm on my two feet because I'm in the shallow end of the pool and that's great. And in the same way, when you and I, when our identity in Christ is so strong, and I receive all of the love and the undeserved kindness from Jesus, everything that I truly need. I don't have to fight and claw for that from you if I don't get it, but rather I can encourage and I can pray for you. And my eyes can be taken off of myself because I know that all of my needs are met in Jesus. Paul takes this opportunity in verses six and seven to both privately and publicly encourage him. He says, 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. I have derived much joy and comfort from your love, my brother. The hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you. He's doing a couple of different things. First, he is talking about the sharing of faith and of

life. That partnership that you and I have with one another that we did not have in Christ. And secondly, he's also pointing to what he's about to ask him. My heart's been refreshed through you, Philemon, as you have loved the saints, as you have cared for the saints that are in the church, that meets in your house. And also, he's about to ask him to care for a new saint that he doesn't know about yet. Even though Onesimus is right in front of him hand-delivering this note, so he probably knows what's coming up. So first, we're called to pray for and to encourage one another. The more that you and I truly embrace the freedom and the forgiveness of the gospel, to know that the King and Master of the universe has forgiven me despite my great wickedness, you can't help but be drawn to other sinners saved by grace.

So secondly, we are called to pursue forgiveness and freely give forgiveness. In the Greco-Roman world, in the first century, servanthood really would have varied based on where you are and the time period and the master that you had. Some servants would come into their master's possession because they couldn't pay off a debt, and so they sold themselves into that kind of servanthood. Others were born into it. Or there's prisoners of war, and the list kind of go on and on. There's records of servants being like business associates coming alongside their masters of working in agricultural labor, domestic chores around the house, even as policemen. So we don't know exactly why Onesimus ran away. It's possible he was on a business errand for Philemon, or simply that he just wanted a different life, stole from him and left and hid in Rome. The punishment for such a servant could have been as worse as execution and at best, branding, either on the forehead or another part of the body. Two different letters for what he had done. F for fugitive and C. F standing for in their language. Beware of thief to wear that shame for the rest of your life. And he in good. In God's good providence, Onesimus seeks out Paul, most likely because he had remembered hearing about Paul from Philemon, perhaps even had known him before. It seems much more likely, and seeks him out in prison and thinks this guy can help me. This guy could help solve my problem, or even perhaps He could help me get back with my master and intercede for me. We don't have the conversation clearly in front of us. You probably read through the lines, but I imagine that as Paul shared the gospel with him, the connections between what he's going through and the gospel have to have been just imminently clear. Onesimus, your master, he's angry with you. You stole and you cheated him and you left. He's got wrath toward you. And the punishment that's coming. It might be fair. But. Onissimus, there's another master. The master of the entire universe. King over all creation. And he has his wrath on you as well. Brother, it's not because of your status in life, and it's not even just because that you have stolen in this particular instance and run away, but rather because when you were born into this world, just like the rest of mankind, you were born a sinner inheriting that corruption. And before God you stand condemned. And yet this master sent his son to save you, to die a death on your behalf. Onesimus, repent and believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved.

When I was on staff with campus outreach, that was my role. Before coming here to Briarwood, we had a few different phrases that we would use in our discipleship of especially younger believers. I remember when I first came to faith and was being discipled by someone, and they were helping me, especially with evangelism, and they would ask these three questions and they've served me quite well. Where is he now? Where is he going? What's the

next step? Where is he now? Where is he going? What's the next step? And I imagine for Paul, he knew the next step. Even though Onesimus had become useful in the kingdom of God and in the spreading of the gospel, he knew the next step was for him to enact the gospel and to move forward in this very difficult relationship. But there's no way he could move forward in ministry without doing that. And in the same way, the next step for Philemon, as difficult as it would have been, was also to act out this gospel. It would have been quite astonishing in the first century, Christian or not, what he's asking Philemon to do. He's really not just asking him to overlook a financial loss. He's asking him to receive this man who had wronged him. And even I know, as terrible as this may sound, he's also giving an example to others that if you run away, the same thing could happen for you. His business is at stake. And yet the gospel. This good news changes everything. The relationship that once existed between master and slave has now been transformed. Because both men belong to Christ. Equal before the cross. For Philemon, Paul is asking him to forsake his earthly treasures and possessions. In fact, it will cost him a great deal. So what does forgiveness mean? That could be a tricky question, in particular with this letter. As I was reading some different pastors and theologians of how they defined it, I wrote these down. I thought these would be helpful for us as well.

Chris Bronze, who's a pastor who wrote a book on forgiveness. He said it's a commitment by the offended to pardon graciously the repentant from moral liability and to be reconciled to that person. Although not all consequences are necessarily eliminated. Okay, a long definition. Next one. Tim Keller says this is much shorter, renouncing Revenge and being open to reconciliation. Dan Hamilton says this forgiveness is to deal with our emotions by denying them the dark pleasure of venting them. Pain is the consequence of sin. There's no easy way to deal with it. Wood nails, referring to Jesus and pain are the currency of forgiveness. In other words, when we're forgiving another person, even though Jesus has paid for that sin with his blood, you and I will receive earthly cost that helps us to enact the gospel for this person. And what a privilege it is, even though we don't think of it that way. What a privilege it is that you and I. We get to share the gospel with our brothers and sisters when we forgive them.

Ken Sande wrote an incredible book on biblical peacemaking, and here's what he says. These are three promises that we make when we forgive. First, I will not dwell on this incident. I will not bring up this incident again and use it against you. And last, I will not talk to others about this incident. Oh. Someone always bears a penalty and forgiveness. But as we seek to forgive one another as Christ has forgiven us, so we too are modeling and preaching by our actions, the gospel to one another. Just as God will not punish you for this sin, neither will I. And yet this is a spiritual matter. It's spiritual in the sense that nonbelievers can't do this in the way that we can, in the sense that the motivation here is the love and the grace that we have been shown, and so freely we would show it to others. In many ways. That's the reason that in Matthew eighteen, as the biblical process for discipline continues on and gets deeper, there's actually this presumption of, I wonder, is this person a Christian to where if you get to the end, man, we're going to let this person go. And yet with always the desire that they would repent, it is not punitive. T

Take a look here in Luke 17 Jesus says in verses three and four, *pay attention to yourselves. If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him. And if he sins against you seven*

times in the day. Oh my goodness. And turns to you seven times saying, I repent. You must get super frustrated with him. That's not what he says. You must forgive him. Pay attention to the beginning of verse three. He says, pay attention to yourselves. When we are sinned against and we're asked to forgive, Jesus says, at that very moment, you've got a big temptation to sin, which is to go, man, I can't believe that you did this and you did this, and to dwell upon it, to hurt you, to get revenge, he says. In that very moment, you have the opportunity to repent yourself and to understand how much you have been forgiven. Finally, we're called to lead others towards reconciliation. We're called to lead others towards reconciliation. This letter, it's really a masterclass in how to help folks reconcile. But it's also incredible wisdom in how, at least with how we might define it from a world's perspective. Paul's got a lot of emotional intelligence, relational tact. He knows both of these guys so well, and especially with Philemon. He knows all the different things that he might say in order to convince him, as the Holy Spirit's working in him. It's time to forgive. We've already read in verses four through seven, but to be honest, this entire letter really is the appeal to forgive in verses four through seven. He's talking so much about the love that he has towards the saints, and what the good news of the gospel has already transformed in Philemon's life, with the expectation that that will continue. In verse eight, Paul acknowledges that he could command Philemon to forgive Onesimus and be reconciled, but he preferred to appeal to him out of love for Christ and the church. You ever tried to Force two people to say, sorry, I did that earlier this afternoon. There were two small children with the last name Webb. There was some hitting involved. And I said, hey, say sorry, say sorry. And you know, they looked at each other in very genuinely sorry and ran away. Right. It's you can't force it. Like there's got to be a heart change there. In verse nine, he says, I'm old and I'm in jail. It's actually, as I read some of the commentators, they just about all agree there's a little bit of a sympathy card Paul is playing. We don't see that in other letters. It's pretty interesting. In verse twelve he says, Onesimus is of my very heart. This is a emotional appeal for him. You should treat him like you treat me. This is my child and the faith. He's become useful in the gospel ministry. Verse sixteen, he appeals to the fact that Onesimus is no longer a bondservant but a brother, and that he can receive him both in the flesh and in the Lord. In verse seventeen through twenty, he actually puts his money where his pen is. He says, I will pay for any damages or monies that Onesimus took from you. And finally, in verses nineteen through twenty, Paul says, Philemon owes Paul his very life. He led both of these guys to Christ. It's quite the position of being. And yet he is appealing out of love for the body of Christ and for the Savior, and an appeal to the fact that you have already been forgiven. Everyone here is modeling the good news of Jesus, Onesimus. He's humbly seeking the forgiveness of his master, awaiting to be lifted up to a status that in this life he did not possess. Philemon is being asked to not hold this debt against Onesimus, but rather forgive him and receive him as a brother. And Paul is saying, I will even take his debt upon me. In the same way that Jesus took on mine. And ultimately, he goes on to make the final point. He says in verse twenty, yes, brother, I want some benefit from you in the Lord. Refresh my heart in Christ. This letter was written in about sixty to sixty two A.D. And within about five years Paul would die. And as the persecution continued to increase, so did the gospel spread throughout the land. Within the next twenty to thirty years, all of the gospel accounts would be written and disseminated, and the canon was finished and the world was being turned upside down. And

in about one hundred and ten A.D., there was a great Roman military victory. And it was decided that at the celebration for some entertainment, there would be a killing of some Christians. One of those Christians of the early church fathers, his name was Ignatius of Antioch. He was the Bishop of Antioch. Just think, pastor, if that word throws you off. And as Ignatius is led by the Roman Imperial Guard to his eventual martyrdom, as they stop along the way, he's actually requesting that he could see other bishops and be refreshed by them, and he writes letters and hands them directly to them. And these are letters about how to handle persecution. They're letters about unity in the church, about how to live as a Christian. And he writes seven letters and these seven interactions. And one of those is with the bishop of Ephesus. For the sake of your next church history trivia night, would you like to know in one hundred and ten A.D. who was the Bishop of Ephesus? His name is. Inasmuch as. Most of the historians that I went back and read. Although it's not one hundred percent concrete, they believe all signs point to the fact that this is the same Onesimus. Most freedmen would not have been born and given this name which meant useful. In fact, the time period just about works out. And there's some things in that letter that even point to the fact that this is the same man, the man who was a servant, who ran away, and whose life, for all intents and purposes, according to this world, looked over. And yet God and His providence used Paul to share the gospel with him. And we don't know the end of this letter. We're not told. But everything points to the fact that when Onesimus handed that letter to Philemon, just like Esau welcomed Jacob and Joseph welcomed his brothers And the father and the prodigal son story representing the Lord for us welcomed us in. Philemon welcomed Onesimus no longer as a servant but as a brother. How might you be called even this week? To seek how your relationships would be transformed. And even when it seems like a privilege to take part in these things, or even when it seems like a burden rather, how might God be using it to spread his kingdom? We are called to encourage and pray for one another, to forgive and to seek forgiveness and to help others be reconciled in the Lord. Let's pray.