

Church at the Fairgrounds Sermon, “Restoring Relationships”

Philemon

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Dominant Thought: Christ refreshes by restoring relationships.

It was Easter Sunday. I [Warren] had a challenging conversation with a leader prior to our Easter sunrise service. Later that day as we were cleaning up after our meal of ham and scalloped potatoes, I replayed the conversation with my wife. I portrayed myself as the wounded and wronged party. The Holy Spirit has a special way to use the voice of those closest to us to convict us. She provided clarity on the situation. I knew I needed to call the leader up to apologize for my response. I called the leader up. He reluctantly agreed to my visit. Not because he was unwilling, but because he was gracious. I came. I apologized. We reconciled. We agreed on a path forward. We lived at peace. However, it hurt a little bit to feel the conviction of the Spirit. It was a little difficult to pick up the phone. But, it was worth it.

Have you had a similar experience? Maybe you were the offending party. Some people simply speak first, then think. Others were caught off guard by the experience. Today, we have partnered with families to help raise children in the ways of Jesus with the help of His church. We have vowed to stand with these families. When it comes to our families, we know the importance of restoring relationships. It seems like a weekly experience in our household we are asking someone for forgiveness. It may have been my tone with my kids. I may have said something in front of others that embarrassed them.

Maybe it's someone at your work? Maybe you've been talking about someone instead of talking to someone. Maybe someone has not kept their promise to you and you are not sure you can trust him or her.

We have some help for us today. Whether you need better relationships at home, school, the work place or your neighborhood. God's word has help for us today. It is found in the shortest letter from the Apostle Paul. It is found in a personal letter from the Apostle Paul to a man named Philemon.

Part 1: Philemon's perspective

Paul writes this letter to Philemon who appears to be a man of some wealth: he has at least one servant and hosts a church that meets in his home.

Let's read the first three verses of Paul's letter to Philemon. (Read Philemon 1-3).

Philemon is a beloved fellow worker of Paul. Apphia may be Philemon's wife. One preacher imagines the fellow soldier Archippus—he called him Archie—as their son. We don't know. Paul also addresses the church that meets in their house.

Paul gives a common greeting to them all: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Then, in typical fashion, Paul prays for those who will read this letter. He thanks God for them in his prayers. They are faithful folks: love and faith they have toward the Lord Jesus and for all the saints. He prays that their partnership may become effective and deep for the sake of Jesus Christ.

Then, Paul shares how deep his relationship with Philemon is. "I have derived much joy and comfort from your love, my brother because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you" (Philemon 7).

Paul has a deep relationship with Philemon. In fact, Paul may have led Philemon to Christ. Later in the letter Paul writes, "not to mention you owe me your very self." (Philemon 19).

As you continue reading the letter, you understand the purpose of this letter. In Philemon 9-10, Paul writes that he's an old man and now a prisoner of Christ. He basically says, "I could command you, but I'd rather appeal to you for love's sake." He appeals on behalf of a man named Onesimus.

For Philemon, simply hearing the name would have raised his blood pressure and made his stomach turn. When I asked you to picture a person with you need to make things right? Onesimus may have come to Philemon's mind. Not that Philemon had wronged Onesimus, but that Onesimus had wronged Philemon. Onesimus was a servant or an

enslaved person in Philemon's house. Many people in the first century went into slavery to pay off debts. Onesimus had run away from Philemon's house. Some people think Onesimus may have stolen some things from Philemon and Apphia on his way out of town.

Paul's request to Philemon is found in Philemon 14-16,

14 But I did not want to do anything without your consent, so that any favor you do would not seem forced but would be voluntary. **15** Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back forever—**16** no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother. He is very dear to me but even dearer to you, both as a fellow man and as a brother in the Lord.

Paul wants Philemon to welcome back Onesimus. Not only does he want him to welcome back a runaway slave, but he wants Philemon to welcome him back as a dear brother. Welcome him as a member of the family.

Imagine you are Philemon. How do you respond? What do you do when you are asked to do something you are not sure you can do? What do you do when you are asked to do something you do not want to do? Now, you are starting to understand what Philemon may be feeling. I'm supposed to welcome someone back into our home who deserted us and may have stolen from us? And welcome him back like a member of the family? Are you crazy Paul.

If you are Philemon, what are you thinking? What's your next move? For some you here today, you can relate to Philemon. For others, may you see yourself from the perspective of Onesimus.

Part 2: Onesimus' perspective

In God's grace, Onesimus runs away from Philemon's house in Colossae and meets Paul. We are not sure where the two meet. But Paul tells us the result of their meeting. In Philemon 10, Paul shares, "I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, who became my son while I was in chains." In other words, Paul wants Philemon to know his former servant Onesimus has become a follower of Jesus. Paul describes those he helps follow Jesus as his son or child. He also called Timothy his true son in the faith.

Onesimus—his name means useful. That's a good name for someone who works in your house. Interesting, Paul says, in Philemon 11, "Formerly he

[Onesimus] was useless to you, but now he has become useful to you and me both.” I would have loved to see the look on Onesimus’ face if he was there when Philemon was reading this letter. “You know how useless he was to you, but now he’s useful to you and me both.” It’s sort of a backhanded compliment. It is a true statement showing how people can change.

When I hear Paul describe Onesimus as formerly useless, I think of Charlie Brown. In the Charlie Brown Christmas movie, Charlie is tasked with finding a Christmas tree for the pageant. He chooses a scraggly looking tree and returns to the group. The kids laugh at Chuck and call him stupid. Then two girls finish him off with, “You’re hopeless. Completely hopeless.” Yet, by the end of the show they come to understand the true meaning of Christmas—the good news of Jesus that Linus shares. Everyone is all smiles by the end.

Onesimus was useless, but through an encounter with the good news of Jesus he lives up to his name as useful.

In Philemon 12, Paul writes, “I am sending him [Onesimus]—who is my very heart back to you.” Paul would have liked to have kept him so he could help him in his imprisonment for the gospel. However, Paul wanted to give Philemon the opportunity to respond first—not out of compulsion but of your own accord (Philemon 14).

Do you think Onesimus wanted to go back to Philemon? He may have had a good reason he left in the first place. Do you think he had the same feeling I did when I had to pick up that phone to make that call or drive over to that person’s house to apologize?

Somehow in God’s grace, Onesimus encountered the good news of Jesus through Paul. And Paul sends this enslaved man now a servant of Christ back to the one he had wronged.

Paul says, “Maybe that’s why you were separated so you could have him back forever—no longer as a bondservant...but as a beloved brother.” (adapted from Philemon 15-16).

In Philemon 17-19, Paul writes, “If you consider me a partner receive him as you would receive me. If he has wronged you at all, or owes you

anything, charge it 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.” Paul is willing to cover any debts Onesimus may have.

Paul is not the only one who was willing to pay a debt he didn’t owe. That’s the good news of Jesus.

Turn to the cross—reconciling

All of us are in debt because of our sins. Jesus Christ paid our debt to restore our relationship with our heavenly Father.

Christ refreshes by restoring relationships.

In another letter the Apostle Paul shares these words in **2 Corinthians 5:17–21 (NIV)** —

17 Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here! **18** All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: **19** that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people’s sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. **20** We are therefore Christ’s ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ’s behalf: Be reconciled to God. **21** God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

Because of Christ, our relationship is restored with our heavenly Father. Because of Christ, we can reflect his love, grace, and forgiveness in our relationships.

What's it look like for Christ to restore relationships?

We understand Jesus loves and died for both people. Both Philemon and Onesimus came to an understanding of the good news of Jesus.

In some cases, a mediator is needed. Paul pleads on behalf of Onesimus to Philemon.

It takes both people to fully reconcile. In some situations that is simply not possible: boundaries may need to be in place because of abuse or maybe

one of the people is no longer living. Then, you talk to God about what's on your heart.

It cannot be forced either (see Philemon 14). Paul wanted Philemon to respond because he wanted. Paul did not want Philemon to feel forced. We cannot force reconciliation. We can do our part, but cannot make choices for the other person.

We don't know how Philemon responded? We are pretty sure Onesimus returned back to Philemon and may even have carried the letter. Did Philemon extend grace and forgiveness to this runaway? Did he welcome back this man as a dear brother and welcomed member of the family?

Application:

Who do you relate to most in this letter? Philemon or Onesimus? With whom do you need to welcome back as a brother or sister in the Lord? What would it look like today if everyone here extended mercy and forgiveness to a person who ran away? Would your Thanksgiving table look different this year? Will your locker room have more peace? Will your families have more grace?

From reading this heartfelt letter, when God restores our relationships through Christ then we experience refreshment. Near the end Paul pleads, "Refresh my heart" (Philemon 20).