

Paul the Reconciler

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[0:00] Please now turn with me to the book of Philemon as we come to the final section of this letter together. 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 you owing me even your own self.

Yes, brother, I want some benefit from you in the Lord. 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. Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends greetings to you.

And so do Mark, Artychus, Demas, and Luke, my fellow workers. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Amen.

[1:32] Before we continue, let's ask for the Lord's help once again. Let's pray. Father, here we are at the end of Philemon. Your undeserved favor has carried us this far, Lord, and we simply ask that you carry us again.

Cause the truth of your word to go out and accomplish the purpose for which you sent it. And Father, again, if there is anything that I say that isn't faithful to your word, would you in your mercy cause it to fall to the floor and die?

In Jesus' name. Amen. It's nearly the end of our three-week vacation. And I hope, like me, you have enjoyed our little stay in modern-day Turkey as a small Colossian house church, putting ourselves in the shoes of the original readers of this very personal, yet very public letter titled Philemon.

We sat and listened, haven't we, to Paul, counsel and pastor, our now dear friends, Philemon the refresher and Onesimus the renewed.

In our first week, we watched the once disgraced bondservant Onesimus walk through those back doors and place this letter into the hands of Philemon, the man whose home we've been staying in and the man who had been likely wronged by Onesimus.

[2:53] And Paul started his letter, didn't he, by first giving thanks for Philemon. Before he asked anything of him, he wanted to make sure he knew just how thankful to God he was for him.

For Philemon was a man of faith and love who refreshed other Christians and was a man, Paul said, I thank my God always when I remember you and I pray that your faith may become more and more effective.

Philemon, you're a refresher and I pray you'll keep on refreshing. Now, on to my appeal for my dear child Onesimus, which was last week, wasn't it?

The Onesimus that Philemon didn't have the fondest of memories of was not the same Onesimus that Paul had landed on his doorstep because Onesimus, the useless bondservant, had become, well, Onesimus, the useful brother.

He'd become a Christian through meeting Paul in prison and now he was a new man with a totally new identity. So, it's almost like last week.

[4:01] We just hit pause halfway through our final episode. The screen is frozen and here we have two equal brothers in Christ standing side by side. One has been likely wronged and the other has been recently renewed.

So, what is it that Paul now wants Philemon to do? What has this whole letter been building to?

Well, verse 17. So, if you consider me your partner, receive him.

Receive him, Philemon, like you would receive me. In other words, Paul, the reconciler, is calling for these two brothers to reconcile.

Now, reconciling is one of those things that is often easy to talk about but in reality, far harder to live out. We love movies about it, don't we? Seeing character arcs end with some sort of restoration.

Two people once distant being finally brought near at the end of the movie, well, it leads to happy tears when the credits start rolling. But when you're the one living out that movie, when you're the one being asked to bring near what was once distant, it suddenly gets a whole lot more complicated, doesn't it?

[5:21] And can that often be true inside the church? We like the idea on paper, but how often do we actually value it that highly in practice? When brothers and sisters in Christ have broken or strained relationships, the default can become that it's better, well, just leave them unmended.

It's fine, as long as they don't see each other. As long as I'm civil and public, and as long as the boat stays unshaken, then we're happy, right? But what I hope we'll see as we walk through this final section of the letter together is just how highly Paul valued brothers and sisters in Christ being reconciled.

But not only that, we also want to see what motivation was given for Philemon to do so. What further motivation is Paul placing in front of him as the letter closes, and what benefits could he expect when receiving an estimous back?

And you see, like all instances where the need to reconcile is present, this situation is unique with its own unique details and individuals. But I hope what we will see is that there are broad principles for us to embrace that will enable us to see the beauty and possibility of receiving once distant brothers and sisters.

Because there might be, even in this very room, strained relationships or broken bonds between brothers and sisters in Christ that might go back years, or maybe just go back this week.

[7:02] For whether it's today or whether it's some future tomorrow, the decision whether to receive or to reject, well, it's going to face us all.

So let's unpack the call for Philemon to reconcile, which takes us on to our first thing to see, which is, Philemon is to reconcile even though it's counter-cultural and costly.

Just look back with me to verse 17 and 18. 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.

Now again, we need to slow down to appreciate the significance of what's been said. Receive Onesimus as you would receive me. The man who was likely known for being a slave who'd packed up and ditched, and in verse 18, we see that he might have even stolen from Philemon and wronged him.

And as we've said before, a bond servant with that type of reputation was likely to be put to death in Roman society. Now again, if you were here last week, you'll know that part of the motivation given for Philemon to receive Onesimus, that Onesimus was no longer the same man that did those things.

[8:25] He'd been saved and renewed through the gospel and Christ. He'd been totally transformed. But to anyone else looking in who wasn't a part of the church, Onesimus was just a rebel slave.

And in that day and culture around, they wouldn't be calling for grace. No, they'd be calling for blood. They'd cheer Philemon on to get his own back and dish out punishment from his position of power.

Philemon, you're so clearly in the right and Onesimus is in the wrong, so crack on and do whatever you think best. I mean, not to do so would be near scandalous. A master not punishing a rebel slave?

I mean, what a sign of weakness. You see, Philemon here is being called to swim against the sea of society, which is no easy task, is it?

And isn't it true that this can be something that often causes us to back away from reconciling with others? It will just raise too many heads. I'll become too unpopular because, I mean, what would people think?

[9:39] It's a lot easier to reconcile with someone when we know it's going to help our public image, isn't it? I receive them, that makes me look good, and I gain the respect from my colleagues and friends.

But when reconciling is going against the cultural norms of the day and threatens to dent your public image, it becomes a whole lot less appealing, doesn't it? But here we see that Paul doesn't hesitate.

Paul knows it's countercultural. Paul knows it's going to be something that many outside the church will look their noses down on. But Paul still calls for Philemon to do it.

Now, it's important to remember that he's been building up to this request. He doesn't just rush in and coldly insist Philemon to suck it up and move on.

No, we've seen him pastorally arrive to this conclusion. But now we're here. It's good for us to see just how countercultural this request would be so that we can understand that we shouldn't use that as an excuse for not being willing to reconcile with a fellow brother or sister in Christ.

[10:51] We can't hide behind the excuse of it will just make me too unpopular or I mean what are the people around me? What are they going to think? Now, in verse 18 Paul offers to balance the books as it were.

Look down with me. If he has wronged you at all or owes you anything charge that to my account. Now, Paul here is not just aware of the social damage that reconciling with Onesimus might bring. No, he's also showing care for the likely financial hit that Philemon took as a result of Onesimus' antics. He doesn't ignore it. No, not at all. He knows that Philemon is due restitution.

If he has wronged you at all or owes you anything charge that to my account. And again, here we see Paul's pastoral wisdom. Yes, Paul is calling for Philemon to reconcile but he's also offering him means to be paid back.

We'll see later that he doesn't really expect him to cash in but the offer is still very much put on the table. Start at verse 19. I, Paul, write this with my own hand.

[12:04] I will repay it. Now, often those two ideas can be seen as opposites in our heads, can't they? It's either one or the other. But here we see it's not wrong to reconcile with someone while receiving restitution.

I mean, for example, this is silly, but imagine I took Joe's car one day without its permission. I didn't fancy a train down to Edinburgh so instead borrowed one of his cars to make the round trip. You see, after a long day of classes, I got tired at the wheel and next thing I know, Joe's car is upside down in some ditch.

After I come to my senses and get all patched up, I recognize my wrongdoing and head back into the office to own up to what I've done. Now, after Joe's had some time to process what's just happened, would it be wrong for him to receive me in brotherly love and forgive me while I still paid him back for the car that's in the ditch?

No, we wouldn't have a problem with that, would we? So let's not think reconciling and restitution are meant to go against each other. But you see, the really striking thing about this is that Paul's the one who's offering to pay the debt.

It wasn't his debt to pay, but he's willing to absorb it so that there might be peace in the church.

That's how highly he values other Christians reconciling because Onesimus likely didn't have the funds to pay back the debt that might have been owed.

[13:36] Paul knows that and if he's made to be the one who paid it back, that could lead to more damage being done so he's willing to absorb it. On me, he calls. On me. Now, I sort of pause and to ask ourselves, would we be willing to absorb cost so that unity might flourish?

Now, it doesn't have to be financial. There are many ways costs can be absorbed. Maybe it's a cost in time, the time it will take to sit down and have that lengthy conversation that should have happened years ago, or the time to counsel.

It wasn't the mess you made, but now you're being called in to mediate between the two parties. Or, it could simply mean paying the debt you rightly owe to someone else. It's within your means to pay them back, but if you're honest, your pride is just keeping in your way, holding you back from the apology you know they're owed.

Or, maybe, you're owed a debt, a debt you could rightly cash in on, but for the benefit of peace, you're willing to bear the cost. I could seek restitution, but I know that will just do more harm than healing.

You see, each individual situation will be unique, having its own varying factors, so it's worth saying that what reconciling looks like will vary depending the situation.

[15:05] But the excuses or the self-justifications of it will just make me too unpopular, it will just cost me too much, aren't valid reasons for refusing to reconcile with another brother and sister in Christ.

So, if there are reasons you're leaning on tonight, please see them as invalid, and then please talk with someone, seek wisdom, for how to best go about reconciling, whether that's chatting with Joe or Anne or another trusted Christian friend.

You see, trusted third parties can be very helpful in these types of situations, especially when complicated factors are in play, and when it's something that we, if we're honest, just don't feel equipped for.

But as we focus on the call to reconcile, even when it's countercultural and costly, we can't just stop there, because we need more fuel in our engines, don't we?

We can be told what to do all day long, but what motivation is going to keep pushing this train up the tracks of obedience? Well, I believe that's given to us at the end of verse 19.

[16:25] Look down with me. I, Paul, write this with my own hand. I will repay it to say nothing of you owing me, even your own self.

Now, that sounds a bit strange, does it not? I, Paul, write this with my own hand. I will repay it. But remember, Philemon, as I put this offer on the table, remember what you first owe me.

Now, Paul isn't guilt tripping Philemon here by pointing attention to the relationship. It can sound like that, but I can assure you he's not.

He is helping Philemon to gain perspective and further motivation. You see, the impression you're left with as the letter comes to a close is that the main motivation for Philemon to receive Onesimus is Philemon's relationship, well, to Paul.

Philemon's relationship to their reconciling. It's almost like there's been a three step process in Paul pastoring Philemon to receive Onesimus. Week one, we saw him get Philemon to first look in the mirror.

[17:41] Philemon, you're a refresher and here's why I'm thankful to God for you. Week two, he got Philemon to then look at Onesimus. I want you to see the transformation that the gospel is brought.

And then week three, Paul says, now look at me. Look at me, Philemon. If you're needing any more motivation to receive this man, remember my relationship with you.

Look in the mirror. Look at Onesimus. Look at the reconciler. You see, we all need a third party to look to when seeking to reconcile with another brother or sister in Christ.

And for Philemon, the third party in this unique situation was the apostle Paul, which won't be the case for us. But you see, we all have the third party that Paul here merely just reflects.

all of us who are believers have the ultimate reconciler to look to the Lord Jesus Christ, the one who truly knew what it meant to say if they have wronged you at all or owe you anything.

[19:00] Charge that to my account. You could say it's the words that hang above the cross as he took the punishment that all our wrongdoing deserve. on me, Father, on me.

If they have wronged you at all or owe you anything, charge it to my account. The things they did when they were young, the things they did last week, the things they will do next year, past, present, future, Father, take it all and put it on my shoulders.

I'll bear the cost so they never have to. I'll be cast off so they can be brought near. You see, as Christians, we love because someone first loved us.

We forgive because we ourselves have been forgiven and we receive because we have been embraced in all our filth and shame. Maybe you're here tonight and for far too long, all you've been looking at is yourself and the other person.

You know you need to reconcile, but if you're honest, your heart, it still resists. Dear brother or sister, lift your eyes to the third party we all need.

[20:22] Lift your eyes to the reconciler and your relationship with him. For remembering how the reconciler has first treated you is what will soften your heart towards others and give you the perspective we all need.

reconciler has to be now. Again, what reconciling looks like in each situation will vary and different factors will determine that. But as we ask those questions with others, let us also ask questions like this to ourselves.

how has Christ treated me in my worst moments? And how might that change my attitude towards the situation? reconciliation? Or maybe you're sitting here this evening and listening to the need to reconcile and deep down you know you've not first been reconciled to God.

I mean, no point hearing about reconciling with others when that foundational relationship is still left unaddressed. Well, friend, whoever you are, there is good news for you tonight.

the God that you have offended and rejected, that God that would have every right to cut off all ties and never think of you again, wants you.

[21:45] Yes, you. He came down in the person and work of Jesus Christ. To die the death you should have died and live the life you should have lived.

He died and rose so your relationship with God could be restored. Others would cast you off. Others would cast you out.

But he offers himself to you tonight. For there's one God, one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all.

So come to him this evening and call out for restoration and that is exactly what you will receive. He'll be forgiven, transformed and reconciled to the God of the whole universe.

So, we've seen the need to reconcile even when it's countercultural and costly. We've seen the goodness of looking to the reconciler for our ultimate motivation.

[22:56] reconciliation. But let's finally see what to expect when reconciling takes place. Look down with me to verse 20. Yes, brother, I want some benefit from you in the Lord.

Refresh my heart in Christ. What will reconciling bring? Well, it will bring refreshment. Refreshment. Now, if you've been with us from the beginning of our series, that word will be ringing somebody else.

Refreshing the hearts of others is what Philemon was known for. We saw that in verse 7. The hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you. Then, last week, when Paul made his appeal for Onesimus, how was it that Onesimus was described?

Verse 12, I'm sending him back to you, sending my very heart. Philemon, you refresh hearts. So, I'm sending you my very own Onesimus.

Receive him. And if you do, that will bring me such refreshment in the Lord. You see, reconciling with another brother or sister in Christ is not just the right thing to do, but it is something that will refresh hearts.

[24:16] It will deeply encourage and nourish the souls of others. I mean, any of you that have been involved in trying to reconcile things can speak of the sheer heartache and pain that comes when that's not found.

When the hours of investment and time ends in unresolved or unhealed relations, it can be heartbreaking, can't it? But oh, how sweet it is when it all comes good.

When brothers and sisters reconcile and unity is upheld within the church, it can lead to some of the sweetest moments, can't it? It can refresh your heart as if there was an ice drink on a scorching summer's day.

So let's be encouraged to view reconciling in that way. As something that will not only do good to our own hearts, but also the hearts of others that are involved.

I mean, if you have other godly people around you who are advising you to reconcile with someone, pouring time and energy so that you might be at peace with another brother or sister, please don't take that involvement lightly.

[25:34] Refresh their hearts by recognizing the good that is to be done. So, reconciling will bring refreshment, but what else can we expect it to bring?

Well, to see that, we need to look at our four remaining verses. Look down with me, I'll read them. 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. Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends greetings to you, and so do Mark, Artaxas, Demas, and Luke, my fellow workers.

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Confident of your obedience, I write to you. Paul is assured that Philemon will do the very thing that he has just written him to do.

He could take offense and reject, but Paul is confident that he won't. Now, what does that bring? Well, it sustains gospel partnership.

[26:42] You see that? Prepare a guest room for me, as I'm hoping to come and stay with you soon. I mean, you don't ask for a room in someone's house that you think is just about to take offense.

But Paul speaks as if he expects everything just to go on as normal. However, if Philemon didn't react in a positive way, then far more than just him would be affected.

He's the one who's likely hosting the church in his home, so imagine what could happen if he took offense. Relationships not only with Paul would be at risk, but also Epaphras, Mark, Arctus, Demas, Luke.

Like a stack of dominoes if one topples the consequences while they're far reaching. But we get no hint of anxiety or nerves with Paul, do we?

Because he's confident how Philemon will respond. And Philemon, reconciling with Onesimus, was doing far more than just healing one broken relationship. No, it was sustaining and protecting many more.

[27 : 50] Because, again, I'm sure we can all think of instances where divisions have occurred in church life. And to begin with, it was just between two parties.

As things progressed and relationships broke down, far more than just two people were affected. Suddenly sides must be taken. What started off with just two people has now become two opposing camps.

You see, division between brothers and sisters in Christ can kill gospel partnership. But reconciling, well, that's what sustains it.

So, again, if you're here tonight and there is tension between you and another brother or sister in Christ, please, as far as you're able, seek to set things right.

Seek out those hard conversations and bring others into help if needed for reconciling really is worth it. I hope we've all seen that tonight.

[29 : 03] But as we end our timeless little letter and as we close with thinking of the call to reconcile and receive, just look down to verse 25.

The parting words from Paul to Philemon and the church in this home and the parting words to us all this evening, the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. As we walk away from this closing section that calls for reconciling between Christians, as we walk away from a letter that had that one main goal in mind, what are we left with?

Well, beautifully, the grace we need to do it. The undeserved favor from God that will enable us to reconcile even when it's countercultural and costly.

The undeserved favor of Jesus that we can first look to before we look at others. And the undeserved favor that brings refreshment to our hearts and sustains gospel partnership when reconciling takes place.

So brothers and sisters, as we close, hear these words again. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, be with your spirit. Let's pray as we close.

[30 : 26] Dear Heavenly Father, we thank you for the time you have given us going through this little letter. Lord, at times it surprises us, at times it encourages us, at others it's brought healing.

And Lord, as we come away from it here in the call to receive and reconcile, we pray by your grace you would grant us all we need to do that if it is required. Lord, make us quick to reconcile with other brothers and sisters in Christ.

We are family and all families have their issues, so please, as far as we are able, would we seek to be at peace with others? Make us people willing to bear the cost.

Make us people who often look to our relationship with Jesus as our ultimate motivation. reconciliation. And as we think about reconciling with others, Lord, we just stop to thank you for first receiving us.

Lord, you had every right to cast us off, but instead, you brought us near in Christ. Father, we fail you so often, but you've not once failed us, and we just praise you for that this evening.

[31 : 32] Lord, as we come to your table, we pray you'd help us see again the reality that it points to. Would we see the reconciler through the bread and the wine we're about to share?

Be with Joe now as he leads us, and refresh all our hearts, we pray, for your glory and our good. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Amen.