

'I APPEAL TO YOU . . .'

Theme: Paul's words to Philemon teach us how to be receptive toward reconciliation when we are the offended party.

In our last study, we were introduced to the tiny book of Philemon; and began to consider how it may help us to understand the work of 'reconciliation' within the church. We defined reconciliation as a work within the body of Christ in which a cause of division between two believers is removed and resolved; and that those who were formerly hostile toward one another can now brought together in peace and made friends again.

In this morning's lesson, we will consider that ministry from the standpoint of the person the Book of Philemon who was the offended party—that is, Philemon himself—and see what we can learn from him about being receptive to God's work of reconciling us with those who may have hurt us.

I. PHILEMON'S CHARACTER BEFORE GOD.

- A. At the beginning of this letter, we see that Philemon is a man of outstanding character. Paul seems to affirm this strongly. We see it in the fact that:
1. Philemon was a fellow laborer in the ministry of the gospel. In the beginning of this letter, Paul affirmed him as “our beloved *friend* and fellow laborer” (v. 1). He had a reputation for cooperation with the ministry of Paul. This might be seen in the fact that the church met in his house (v. 2), that “the hearts of the saints” were “refreshed” by him—perhaps in material ways (v. 7), and by the fact that Paul could appeal to him for a place to stay after he would be released from prison (v. 22). Paul even appealed to his sense of partnership with himself in the labors of the gospel (*koinōnos*; which means “partner” or “sharer”; note the relationship to the word *koinōnia*). Paul—not a man given to flattery—truly valued the fellowship and co-laborship that he enjoyed in the ministry with Philemon.
 2. Philemon was also a man of genuine Christian love. Paul thanked God for him, making frequent mention of him in his prayers, “hearing of your love and faith which you have toward the Lord Jesus and toward all the saints” (vv. 5-6). Paul spoke of having “great joy and consolation” in Philemon's love; because not only were the needs of the saints met by him, but their hearts had been “refreshed” by him (v. 7). His reputation for genuine love for the saints was an encouragement to Paul. Paul, in fact, later appealed to Philemon to give him further joy, and to refresh his heart even more (v. 20).
 3. Finally—and most importantly—Philemon was a man of great faith in Jesus. Paul mentioned his love for the Lord Jesus in verse 5; and affirmed his prayer that “the sharing of your faith may become effective by the acknowledgment of every good thing which is in you in Christ Jesus” (v. 6). Paul knew that if he issued a command to Philemon in the Lord, he would obey it out of love to the Lord (v. 8). Twice in this short letter, Paul affirmed “the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ” toward Philemon (vv. 3, 25).

- B. These things are important to point out. Reconciliation is—above all else—a spiritual work; and a receptivity to a work of the Holy Spirit is only spiritually enabled. When we are the offended party, our receptivity toward God's work of bringing about reconciliation depends much on our relationship with Jesus Christ. When we work hard along the way to advance our own spiritual life—committing to the work of the gospel, showing genuine love toward the saints, walking in a relationship by faith with Jesus—we do a great deal toward preparing our own hearts to be open to the Spirit's call to reconciliation.

II. PHILEMON'S CASE AGAINST ONESIMUS.

- A. It's important to admit that Philemon had a genuine case against Onesimus. Onesimus had been a household slave to Philemon—a slave whose name means “Profitable”, but who had, in fact, proven very unprofitable to Philemon. (Note the play on words that Paul used to express this in verses 10-11.) This “unprofitability” would have shown itself to be true in a couple of ways:
1. For one thing, Onesimus had apparently run away. We shouldn't assume that he ran away because Philemon or his family had been harsh or cruel to him, however. We simply don't know the circumstances of his running away; and cruelty doesn't seem to fit with what we already know of Philemon's Christian character. A runaway slave, in ancient times, was not shown very much mercy. In fact, some have thought that Paul was protecting Onesimus' life in writing this letter. But even so, we really don't have the impression that Philemon—while justifiably angry at the offense—would have shown himself to be harsh or cruel. But the fact that he 'ran away' did indeed prove him to be unreliable to his master.
 2. And for another thing, it would appear that Onesimus stole from Philemon or caused damage to his property in some way. Again, we don't know the full story; but we do have this remarkable promise from Paul: “But if he has wronged you or owes anything, put that on my account. I, Paul, am writing with my own hand. I will repay . . .” (vv. 18-19a). It could be that he ran away because he had stolen money from Philemon. Perhaps the loss to Philemon and his household was substantial. It was clearly significant enough for Paul to be compelled to offer this promise--making it easier for Philemon to forgive Onesimus.
- B. The way that Paul describes Onesimus' offense in the letter teaches us something very important and practical. For reconciliation to fully occur, our woundedness as the offended person needs to be admitted and acknowledged, and the hurt feelings need to be recognized and legitimized. Real reconciliation can't occur if we pass over things, and don't admit the hurts we feel or the damages we suffer. Unresolved hurt that is forced into the emotional 'underground' always grows and shows itself later. There are, of course, times when it is appropriate to overlook a matter. It's true that “love will cover a multitude of sins” (1 Peter 4:8; see also Proverbs 10:12). But there are some sins that keep 'throwing the cover off'. Those need to be dealt with honestly and openly, or genuine reconciliation cannot occur.

III. PHILEMON'S COOPERATION WITH PAUL.

- A. As we can see from Paul's greeting, Philemon is a man who was deeply connected to others. Paul greeted him with Apphia his wife, and with Achippus (perhaps their son,

and who seems to be the pastor of the church), and with the believers of the church that meet in his home (v. 2). He wrote this letter to Philemon along with “Timothy our brother” (v. 1); and he also passed greetings on to Philemon from such noteworthy saints as Epaphras, Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke (vv. 23-24). Philemon had a reputation of impacting other believers (vv. 5, 7), and of impacting Paul himself (vv. 7, 13, 17, 19-20, 22). This is important to remember and helps us to appreciate the importance of cooperating with the effort to bring about reconciliation. When we are not right with another brother because of an offense, we affect others around us.

Reconciliation is important to pursue because it brings health to the body of Christ.

Division causes harm. As the writer of Hebrews has put it, we must “look carefully lest anyone fall short of the grace of God; lest any root of bitterness springing up cause trouble, and by this many be defiled . . .” (Hebrews 12:15).

- B. And because Philemon was a man who was devoted fervently to the Christian faith, we might make another assumption about a possible flaw in his character—one that many of us who seek to be devoted to the Lord Jesus know all too well to be in ourselves. It may be that, as a man of righteousness, he was intolerant toward those who had proven to be unfaithful and untrustworthy. It may be that he was not inclined to give Onesimus another chance after such a failure. And if that's the case, it's important to notice who it was that was writing this letter. At one point in Paul's own story, he himself refused to give an unreliable person another chance. That person was John Mark; who had proven unfaithful in the mission-field, and who had abandoned Paul and Barnabas in the work of the ministry (Acts 13:13). Paul firmly refused to give Mark another chance to serve (Acts 15:37-38). But it must be that—somewhere along the way—Paul's 'righteous' heart was softened toward Mark. Perhaps that's why Paul made a point at the end of this letter to include a greeting from the very same Mark that he had once refused to forgive (see v. 24)—calling Philemon, by example, to do the same. Paul thus made an appeal to Philemon to—in a sense—cooperate with him in his effort to bring about the same kind of reconciliation that had been brought about between him and Mark. He appealed to him “for love sake” (v. 9), for someone who is now a brother “profitable to you and to me” (v. 11)—just as Paul later affirmed that Mark had proven useful to him for ministry (2 Timothy 4:11). He could have commanded reconciliation from Philemon; but he instead made the appeal that he receive Philemon back not by “compulsion”, but in a way that was “voluntary” (v. 14). “If then you count me as a partner, receive him as you would me” (v. 17). Someone may have, at one time, had to speak the very same kind of words to Paul with regard to Mark. We make reconciliation easier if we refuse to fight with, but instead cooperate willingly with, those who are trying to bring it about—who, themselves, may well know the value of such reconciliation.

IV. PHILEMON'S CONFORMITY TO CHRIST.

- A. Perhaps most important of all in this, Philemon was being exhorted—in, it seems, a very gentle way—to conform himself to Christ and His cause. He was told that Onesimus—the offender—is now “begotten” by Paul into the faith (v. 10). He is now no longer merely a slave, but “a beloved brother, especially to me but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord” (v. 16). It is possible that Philemon was a relative of Onesimus in some way—“flesh” in a physical sense. Or it may simply emphasize their fleshly Master/Servant relationship. As Paul wrote in his letter to the Colossian church,

“Bondservants, obey in all things your masters according to the flesh” (Colossians 3:22). But whatever other relationship they had, Paul stresses that Philemon's and Onesimus' relationship was now—above all else—as brothers together in Christ. Onesimus had now been reconciled to Philemon's Lord; and if the Lord Jesus Christ now received and welcomed Onesimus, so must Philemon.

- B. In order for reconciliation to happen in our lives, we need to learn to focus—most of all—on what Christ has brought about for us through His blood. As John has written, “In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another” (1 John 4:10-11). Obviously, this does not mean that we are to be carelessly reconciled to someone who still holds on to their sin. They are not yet reconciled to Christ. But to remain 'unreconciled' with someone that Christ has genuinely forgiven is to say that we are more just and righteous a judge than Jesus Himself! If Jesus truly is our Lord, we must love whoever He loves; and we must be reconciled to whoever He reconciles to Himself. Otherwise, we do not truly love Him.