

## “RECEIVE HIM AS YOU WOULD ME”

Theme: Paul's actions toward Onesimus and Philemon teach us how we can be used by God in the process of reconciliation.

Over the past while, we have been learning, from the little book of Philemon, some of the lessons it has to teach us about reconciliation—that necessary and worthy 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. We began by considering what this letter had to teach us from Philemon himself—the man who was the offended party in the situation. And in our last lesson, we considered Onesimus—the runaway slave who was the offending party. And now, in this morning's lesson, we'll consider the apostle Paul—who played the role of 'facilitator' between the two.

In a case in which two people are at odds with one another in the Body of Christ, a facilitator is often needed. Take for example the words of the apostle Paul to an unknown brother in Christ in Philippians 4. Apparently, two women in the church were out of fellowship with each other over something. He wrote, “I implore Euodia and I implore Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord” (Philippians 4:2). But his appeal to those two women alone was not enough. He also wrote, “And I urge you also, true companion, help these women who labored with me in the gospel . . .” (v. 3). Someone else needed to step in and facilitate their reunion. Or take what he told the Corinthian believers—who had a sad habit of bringing lawsuits against one another: “Dare any of you, having a matter against another, go to law before the unrighteous, and not before the saints? Do you not know that the saints will judge the world? And if the world will be judged by you, are you unworthy to judge the smallest matters?” (1 Corinthians 6:1-2). He added, “Is it so, that there is not a wise man among you, not even one, who will be able to judge between his brethren?” (v. 5)—implying that there surely was at least one wise mediator, if they would simply look.

The work of facilitating in reconciliation is a dangerous one. It should only be done by those who are spiritually mature and utterly dependent upon the Lord—careful not to let themselves be caught up in the hostilities. The principle of Galatians 6:1—“Brethren, if a man is overtaken in any trespass, you who are spiritual restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness, considering yourself lest you also be tempted”—can also be rightly applied to the situations of two or more unreconciled brethren. Paul is a great example. Let's consider what we learn from him . . .

### **I. WITH RESPECT TO THE OFFENDED PARTY.**

- A. Notice first Paul's gracious approach. There was no flattery in his words. He genuinely honored Philemon's maturity in the Lord. He called him “our beloved friend and fellow laborer” (v. 2). He sincerely thanked God for Philemon (v. 4); and testified of his reputation for love and faith “toward the Lord Jesus and toward all the saints” (v. 5). He said that he had “great joy and consolation” in Philemon's love, “because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed by you, brother” (v. 7). Paul rightly recognized the ways that Philemon had proven himself to be a truly outstanding follower and sacrificial

servant of Jesus in the past. He didn't give the impression that Philemon was out of fellowship with the Lord, nor did he ignore the reputation for true godly character that Philemon had already exhibited. This is a much more effective approach than to begin with a rebuke.

- B. Notice too how Paul appealed to Philemon's nobler qualities. Those nobler qualities were there; and Paul crafted his request in such a way as to awaken them. He said that he prayed for Philemon, “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). To tell him this was to remind him that every good thing in him through Christ would be made effective by obedience—something that would have appealed to Philemon very much. And notice too that, rather than commanding Philemon to do what was “fitting”, he said, “yet for love's sake I rather appeal to you . . .” (vv. 8-9). Paul could have used great authority against Philemon; but he didn't. It is far wiser to appeal to a believer's impulse of love to be reconciled than to issue a command to do so. To do so out of love is to do so willingly; but to do so out of compulsion is not. As the saying goes, 'A man convinced against his will is of the same opinion still.' This is why Paul could say at the end of the letter, “Having confidence in your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say” (v. 21). Paul also knew Philemon to be a man whose passion was for redemption in Christ; and so, he told him, “For perhaps he departed for a while for this purpose, that you might receive him forever, no longer as a slave but more than a slave—a beloved brother, especially to me but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord” (vv. 15-16). How could the transforming work of the gospel of Jesus Christ not move Philemon with joy?
- C. Finally, notice how Paul made himself a part of the appeal. He said, “If then you count me as a partner, receive him as you would me” (v. 17). Paul connected himself to Onesimus; and thus gave Philemon a point of reference for welcoming Onesimus to himself. But notice too that Paul was not above pulling out an I.O.U. on Philemon!—telling him, “not to mention to you that you owe me even your own self besides” (v. 19). We don't know the story behind this particular reminder; but whatever it was, we know that Philemon would have nodded his head in agreement to it. That's not a bad thing to do in such a case—so long as there truly is something there to draw from! Paul wouldn't—in that case—be asking Philemon for anything greater than what he himself had already done for Philemon. This whole reconciliation would be a joy to Paul; and so he could make the request a very personal one: “Yes, brother, let me have joy from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in the Lord” (v. 20). We go a long way toward facilitating reconciliation when we rightly and carefully involve ourselves in a positive outcome.

## **II. WITH RESPECT TO THE OFFENDING PARTY.**

- A. What little we know of Paul's work toward Onesimus is only through the appeal he made to Philemon. But we can see that Paul did much to help prepare the way. First, he got the offending party right with God. He led Onesimus to faith in Christ—calling him “Onesimus, whom I have begotten while in my chains” (v. 10). He affirmed that Onesimus, “once was unprofitable to you, but now is profitable to you and me” (v. 11)—calling him the same thing he called Philemon; “a beloved brother” (v. 16). The gracious work of Christ in Onesimus' heart would have gone a long way toward melting hard hearts in both sides of the argument!

- B. Second, Paul had invested into Onesimus' life. Paul said, “I am sending him back”—as if he had borrowed him from Philemon for a while! “You therefore receive him, that is, my own heart” (v. 12). He presented Onesimus as if he had, as it were, ministered to Paul in Philemon's place; “whom I wish to keep with me, that on your behalf he might minister to me in my chains” (v. 13). This made the return of Onesimus seem like a genuine loss to Paul. But notice too that he had so invested in the young man's life that he was able to appeal to him that he himself needed to return to Philemon. Perhaps Onesimus was afraid to do so; but reconciliation made it necessary.
- C. Third, notice that Paul was willing—as much as he could—to take the wrongdoing of Philemon upon himself. He pursued reconciliation sacrificially. He said, “But if he has wronged you or owes you anything, put that on my account. I, Paul, am writing with my own hand. I will repay . . .” (vv. 17-18a). In doing this, Paul literally took away any obstacle that could have stood between them. Perhaps this is why Paul could ask Philemon, “Receive him as you would me.”

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Before we leave a consideration of Paul as facilitator toward these two men, it might be important to consider something about Paul himself. In this important work Paul didn't wield his authority as an apostle. He humbled himself as “Paul, the aged, and now also a prisoner of Jesus Christ” (v. 9). He was wise in not throwing his weight around—making a quick 'reconciliation' perhaps happen on the surface, but leaving feelings unchanged in the process; and perhaps even wounding hearts in the process. And we should note that Paul didn't go it alone. He wrote this letter along with Timothy (v. 1), and with the knowledge of others (vv. 23-24); and he knew that others in Philemon's church family would read it (v. 2) and would join in on the appeal.

With careful consideration of the needs of the offende, and of the offender—and with due caution with respect to ourselves—may God use us in His good work of reconciliation!