

“THE GRACE OF THE LORD JESUS CHRIST BE WITH YOUR SPIRIT”

Theme: Reconciliation is possible, because Jesus shows Himself to be the Great Reconciler.

We come this morning to our last look into the little book of Philemon, and of the things it has to teach us about reconciliation.

We have defined reconciliation as that spiritual 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. And this would be a good time for us to review what we have already learned from the three main parties in the story.

- (1) From our study of Philemon himself, who was the offended party, we learned the importance of the godly character of the one being appeased. Paul had praised him as a fellow-laborer in the gospel, characterized him by his demonstrable Christian love, and affirmed him as a man who had a manifest faith in Jesus Christ. We learned that this manifest spiritual character was vital; because true biblical reconciliation is--above all else--a spiritual work. We also learned that it's important to the offended person that the offense be treated seriously, and that the wounds and hurt feelings be given legitimacy. We saw that a true spirit of cooperation with the process of reconciliation on the part of the offended one was important—and should include a readiness to give the offender another chance. And finally--and perhaps most important on the part of the offended person--there was to be a willing and humble conformity to Christ Himself, who is the Great Reconciler.
- (2) Then, from our study of Onesimus, who was the offending party, we learned that the offender also needs to become fully submitted to Christ--making sure to have fully received the reconciling work of Christ toward themselves. There needs to be a readiness to submit one's self to the fellowship of the Body of Christ--seeking the body's support in the process, and receiving the help of others. In the context of submission to Christ and to the body, there needs to be a complete readiness to personally take ownership of the damages that have been done; along with a willingness to do what ever is necessary to make things right--even to the point of being submitted to the aid of a facilitator who might serve as a guide and, if needs be, a guarantor of the repayment.
- (3) And in our last time together, we learned--from our study of Paul--what it means to do the hard work of serving as the facilitator in the process of reconciliation. With respect to Philemon, we saw how Paul demonstrated a graciousness in his approach, an appeal to the higher and nobler motives of the one who was offended, and a sacrificial willingness to take the debt of the offender upon himself if it would make reconciliation possible. With respect to Onesimus, Paul labored to get the offender right first with God, then to invest personally into his life as a mentor, and to demonstrate that a full repayment was the right thing to do by a willingness to pay it himself. We saw that Paul was humble in his approach--never throwing his weight around as a spiritual superior, but making his appeal as a brother. And we saw that he relied dependently upon the support of others in the process.

Throughout all that we have learned from this tiny book, Jesus Christ Himself has stood behind the scenes as the one who sets the pattern for true reconciliation. He is the great inspiration of the work of reconciliation, He is the one who makes that work possible, and He is the one to whose glory the work is done.

Consider that . . .

I. IT IS TO BE DONE IN HUMBLE OBEDIENCE AND SUBMISSION TO CHRIST.

Paul put the matter boldly to us when he began by identifying himself as “Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus . . .” (v. 1). This was obviously because he was in prison for the cause of the gospel. But it was also something that he made a key part of his appeal for reconciliation; saying, “yet for loves sake I rather appeal to you--being such a one as Paul the aged, and now a prisoner of Jesus Christ . . .” (v. 9). For Paul, the whole matter of reconciliation was not an option. It was a matter of submission and obedience to the one that has--as it were--captured Paul, conquered his heart, and made him His obedient servant. So often, we refuse or reject the process of reconciliation because it doesn't conform to our will or fit in with our wishes. But if we view ourselves--as we rightly should--as 'prisoners' of Christ, then His will takes precedent over our own. When Paul wrote that he knew Philemon would be obedient (v. 21), he ultimately meant it as obedience to Christ.

II. IT OUGHT TO BE DONE OUT OF LOVE TOWARD THOSE WHOM JESUS ALSO LOVES AND HAS RECONCILES TO HIMSELF

Paul presented Onesimus as “begotten” in Christ (v. 10); and declared him to no longer be only a slave to Philemon, but now “a beloved brother . . . in the Lord” (v. 16). Philemon--who himself had been reconciled to God through Christ, and who had a manifest love for all the saints (v. 5)--would be utterly inconsistent in his faith if he would refuse to be reconciled to someone who His Lord and Master had also reconciled to Himself. To refuse to forgive the one that Jesus forgave would be to deny the even greater grace God has shown us in forgiving us! See the Lord Jesus' very stern teaching on this such passages as Matthew 6:14-15 and 18:21-35.

III. IT IS POSSIBLE TO BE DONE BY THE UNLIMITED RESOURCES THAT JESUS MAKES AVAILABLE TO US.

It wasn't mere coincidence that Paul reminded 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). There is, then, all the resources of the indwelling Christ available to Philemon--and to Onesimus also--in being reconciled with one another. There are the unlimited resources of the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23), and the unlimited power of Christ Himself to help them (Philippians 4:13). God's own divine power for all things that pertain to life and godliness are available to them through Christ (2 Peter 1:3). Truly the whole Trinity is supportive of the work of helping us to be reconciled to our brother or sister in Christ.

IV. IT IS ENCOURAGED TO BE DONE IN THE LIGHT OF THE SACRIFICE THAT THE LORD JESUS HIMSELF ALREADY MADE FOR US.

When Paul said, “if he has wronged you or owes anything, put that on my account” (v. 18), he was simply modeling the pattern already set by Jesus Himself. We can forgive each other, and we can restore the wrong we have done to each other, because Jesus has taken all of our sins upon Himself and paid the price for us. The Lord Jesus, by His sacrifice, has reconciled us to God (2 Corinthians 5:20-21). And now, as people reconciled to God, we can be reconciled to one another. If Jesus has completely removed any barrier that would keep us from a holy God,

then how can we think that a greater barrier could still remain that would keep us from one another?

**V. IT IS—MOST OF ALL--TO BE DONE OUT OF GRATEFUL LOVE TO CHRIST
OUR SAVIOR WHO HAS RECONCILED US TO GOD.**

Paul made his appeal “for love's sake” (v. 9); and appealed to Philemon to let him “have joy” from him “in the Lord”. Reconciliation could not be denied, because it is based on the “grace” and “peace” that is “from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ” (vv. 3, 25). It is not by accident that the Holy Spirit led Paul to affirm “grace and peace” at both the beginning and end of this letter. We are the recipients of God's grace and are now at peace with Him. How can we unworthy sinners--who are now completely loved and accepted by God through Christ--refuse to love one another (see 1 John 3:16)?