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As I was thinking about the sermon this morning, the thought occurred to me, can you imagine if the Apostle Paul had a cell phone how many calls and text messages he would have sent out to his wide circle of associates and friends? After the apostle Paul had established churches during his missionary journeys, he continued to oversee the spiritual growth of the new congregations either by visiting them or by writing letters to them or both. In most of his letters the main part is divided into two sections, the first deals with doctrine or theology and the second dealing with practical problems facing the church. Paul usually dictated his letters to someone else who did the actual writing. Today we are going to hear from the last of Paul's letters as they are presented in the New Testament.

To me the current arrangement of Paul's letters in the New Testament was an unfortunate choice – they are arranged basically from longest (Romans) to shortest (Philemon). I think it would be more interesting, helpful, and revealing if Paul's letters in the New Testament were listed as best as can be determined in the order in which they were written. That way we could see more easily the development of his thinking over the 12-15 years in which the letters that are preserved were written. The first letters Paul wrote to the church at Thessalonica (thes-uh-luh-nī-kuh) deal primarily with the **second coming of Christ and the end of the age**. A few years later during his third missionary journey, Paul sent four of his most important letters to the churches in Galatia, Corinth, and Rome these deal with a number of topics but mostly with **the way of salvation**. Several years later while in prison in Rome, Paul wrote to Christians in Ephesus, Colossae (kuh-lahs-ay), and Philippi deal with **the person and work of Jesus**. At this time, he also wrote a brief personal note to Philemon.<sup>1</sup>

With only 25 verses in English from the 335 words in the Greek original, **Philemon is the shortest of Paul's writings**. The Letter to Philemon is addressed to specific persons. **It is a letter of mediation seeking to foster reconciliation between two individuals who both are connected to Paul** and view him as their spiritual leader. **Philemon**, a slave owner, and **Onesimus**, a slave who fled Philemon's household but who, after time with Paul, returned, wishing to make things right. **The**

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<sup>1</sup> Bruce M. Metzgar, *The New Testament: It's Background, Growth and Content* (3<sup>rd</sup> edition, Abingdon, Nashville, 2003), page 252. The Letter to Philemon is one of the seven letters that almost all biblical scholars believe were written by the apostle Paul, the others are 1 Thessalonians, Galatians, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Romans, and Philippians.

**Letter to Philemon is Paul's plea for a renewed relationship between the two, but one on better terms than before in light of their mutual faith as Christians. The central meaning of the letter concerns the difference the transforming power of the gospel can make in the lives and relationships of believers to bring about reconciliation, regardless of class or other distinctions.**

"Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother,  
**To Philemon** our **dear friend and co-worker**, to Apphia our sister,  
to Archippus our fellow soldier, and to the church in your house:

**Grace** to you and **peace** from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

When I remember you(e) in my prayers, I always thank my God because I hear of **your love** for all the saints and **your faith** toward the Lord Jesus.

I pray that the sharing of **your faith** may become effective when you perceive all the good that we may do for Christ. I have indeed received much joy and encouragement from **your love**, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you, my brother. For this reason, *though* I am bold enough in Christ to *command* you to do your duty, yet I would *rather appeal to you* on the basis of **love**—and I, Paul, do this as an old man, and now also as a prisoner of Christ Jesus.<sup>g</sup> I am appealing to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I have become during my imprisonment. Formerly he was **useless** to you, but now he is indeed **useful** both to you and to me. I am sending him, that is, **my own heart**, back to you. I wanted to keep him with me, so that he might be of service to me in your place during my imprisonment for the gospel; but I preferred to do nothing without your consent, in order that your good deed might be voluntary and not something forced. Perhaps this is the reason he was separated from you for a while, so that you might have him back 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.

So if you consider me your partner, welcome him as you would welcome me.

If he has wronged you in any way, or owes you anything, charge that to my account. I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand: I will repay it. I say nothing about your owing me even your own self. Yes, brother, let me have this *benefit* from you in the Lord! Refresh my heart in Christ. Confident of your obedience,

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e **From verse 4 through verse 21, you is singular**

g Or as an ambassador of Christ Jesus, and now also his prisoner

h The name **Onesimus** means *useful* or (compare verse 20) *beneficial*

I am writing to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say.

One thing more—prepare a guest room for me, for I am hoping through your prayers to be restored to you.

Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends greetings to you,<sup>i</sup> and so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke, my fellow workers.

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.”

One of the great themes that runs through the Bible from beginning to end is the theme of **Reconciliation**. From the beginning in Genesis God is seeking to be reconciled with people and trying to help people be reconciled to each other. From the first man and woman and their sons Cain and Abel (who were the first murderer and the first murder victim) to the story of the brothers Jacob and Esau (Genesis 33:4, 11) whose relationship was marked by deception, cheating, and estrangement to the story of Joseph and his eleven brothers who beat him and sold him into slavery in Egypt – Genesis is filled with stories of brokenness and the need for forgiveness, and reconciliation. Jesus taught about the importance of seeking reconciliation whether we have wronged some one else or someone else has wronged us (Matt. 5:23–26, 18:15). Paul wrote repeatedly about how in Christ’s life, death, and resurrection God has reconciled us and made us new people with a new purpose to be God’s ambassadors of reconciliation. (For more on Reconciliation between God and Humanity, see: Leviticus 8:15; Ezekiel 45:15; Daniel 9:24; Romans 5:1, 10; 11:15; 2 Corinthians 5:18–21; Ephesians 2:15–18; and Colossians 1:20–22).

**Forgiveness and Reconciliation are never easy**, they can be difficult and costly, but if history and current events teach us anything, they teach us that an inability to forgive, seeking revenge, using power to coerce, force, or manipulate others to do what we want often don’t produce the result or outcome we ultimately desire either. There is also no escaping the painful truth that there can be no reconciliation unless all the parties involved want it and are willing to do the hard steps that reconciliation requires. Whether in a marriage, or another family or friend relationship, one can’t help but feel for the person who desires reconciliation but the other person is unwilling to try and make things better or right.

In Paul’s letter to Philemon, “**Each of the parties involved was called to do something difficult:**

**on Paul’s part, to deprive himself of Onesimus’s service and company;**

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<sup>i</sup> Here *you* is singular

**for Onesimus, to return to his master-owner, whom he had wronged;  
for Philemon, to forgive.”**

**Each of them is to do what is difficult as a Christian.**

**Paul – to deprive himself of Onesimus’s service and company.**

Paul is an older man near the end of his life and he is imprisoned or (more likely) under house arrest (verses 9, 13, 23) which enabled him to provide refuge for Onesimus, who for some reason had fled the household of his master, Philemon. Paul’s reference to Onesimus as “*my child, whose father I have become during my imprisonment*” (v. 10) indicates Paul was the primary person who helped Onesimus to become a Christian. Paul always had great joy in leading another person to Christ and he expresses he was blessed to have the benefit and usefulness of Onesimus’ presence. The name Onesimus literally means “useful” or beneficial. Paul appeals to Philemon as a friend and fellow Christian to take Onesimus back without penalty or prejudice, in view of the slave’s conversion and new life in Christ, their common master.

Like Paul, it can be hard for us to deprive ourselves of people who matter to us, of things we enjoy, like, and value in order for reconciliation to take place. But reconciliation often involves our need to give up something, to sacrifice something that is comforting, valuable, or meaningful to us in order for a relationship to be what it should be. If you have a relationship where reconciliation is needed the question to ask yourself is, “What is my Onesimus?” What is it that I find useful or beneficial that I may need to release and let go for reconciliation to be possible?

The second key person in the letter is, of course,

**Onesimus** –who Paul instructs **to return to his master-owner, whom he had wronged**. In his letter to the Colossians (4:7-9) Paul refers to Onesimus traveling with Tychicus (tik-uh-kuhs) to the Colossian church.

Colossians 4:1, “*Masters, treat your slaves justly and fairly, for you know that you also have a Master in heaven.*”

Colossians 4:7-9, “*Tychicus will tell you all the news about me; he is a beloved brother, a faithful minister, and a fellow slave in the Lord. 8 I have sent him to you for this very purpose, so that you may know how we are and that he may encourage your hearts; 9 he is coming with **Onesimus, the faithful and beloved brother, who is one of you.** They will tell you about everything here.*”

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o Other authorities read *that I may know how you are*

Paul has come to see Onesimus as a faithful and beloved brother but he knows that Onesimus as a Christian has to take the difficult step of returning to his master-owner whom he had wronged. We don't know the nature of what Onesimus did, whether he took something, broke something, or simply stole himself away to freedom. Whatever it was was, he needed to return and to confess and admit his wrongdoing. This is always difficult for us to do – to humble ourselves before someone else and say contritely and truly, "I was wrong, I hurt you, and I am deeply sorry. I want to make things right." Onesimus has become a faithful, beloved, trusted companion of Paul, it must have been excruciating for him to have to risk giving up his new life where he was treated with respect and given responsibility to risk returning to his master for an uncertain fate. When you think you can take a step of reconciliation remember this - since fugitive slaves were subject to severe penalty (usually burning the legs or arms with hot iron or branding the forehead), this step of reconciliation was a significant risk for Onesimus. Part of reconciliation is having the courage to return to the one we have wronged.

The third person in the letter is Philemon, a man who was converted to Christianity by Paul (Philem. 19), probably at Ephesus. He had been associated with Paul's mission, for he is described as 'our beloved fellow worker' (Philem. 1). Since he was able to host a congregation (Philem. 2) and prepare a guest room for Paul (Philem. 22), Philemon was an individual of substance. Paul observes that Philemon was recognized as a person of faith and love toward Christ and the church. **Philemon** has a difficult task of **to forgive the one who has wronged him. Not only that**, but the letter that is sent to him is sent to the whole church that meets in his house and Paul is lovingly putting pressure on him, he asks but doesn't command him, to forgive Onesimus, to charge any financial loss to Paul's account, and to receive Onesimus back not as a slave but as a beloved brother. Can you imagine if I included on the cover of the church newsletter the names of all the people who needed to be reconciled – who needed to give or receive forgiveness to each other? I suspect I would be looking for another job. Yet that is what Paul is doing to Philemon, he is letting the whole church know what he wants Philemon to do and now the whole church will know whether Philemon followed Paul's request or not.

It is an interesting exercise to think about who has the most difficult task – Paul having to lose Onesimus, Onesimus having to return to the one he has wronged to ask forgiveness, or Philemon, who is very publicly asked to forgive the one who has

wronged him. Perhaps our answer depends on who we related to most in the letter. We should also mention Apphia, Philemon's wife, who is named by Paul in the beginning of the letter. She would be significantly impacted by taking Onesimus back into the household and into the church as well as by having to deal with her husband's feelings and his response. When it comes to reconciliation, the circle of people who are influenced is wider than we may realize. Reconciliation is not easy.

An elderly man was walking on a beach found a magic lamp. He picked it up, and a genie appeared. *"Because you have freed me,"* the genie said, *"I will grant you a wish."* The man thought for a moment and then responded. *"My brother and I had a fight thirty years ago, and he hasn't spoken to me since. I wish that he'd finally forgive me."*

There was a thunderclap, and the genie declared, *"Your wish has been granted. You know,"* the genie continued, *"most men would have asked for wealth or fame. But you only wanted the forgiveness and love of your brother."*

*Is it because you are old and dying?"*

*"No,"* the man cried, *"but my brother is, and he's worth about \$60 million."<sup>2</sup>*

Reconciliation is something that does benefit us, but our motivation isn't quite as selfish as the man in that story. When our family was on sabbatical four summers ago in 2003, one of the special places we visited was Coventry Cathedral in England (<http://www.coventrycathedral.org.uk/History.html>). The beautiful cathedral was almost completely destroyed in November of 1940 when it was hit by bombs dropped by the German Air Force during the blitz against the United Kingdom. Workmen picking through the rubble found a large number of nails from the Middle Ages. The nails were gathered up, fashioned into crosses, and plated with silver. One cross of nails was set up on an altar in the ruins of the old cathedral. Behind it is a large cross, made from beams charred during the fire, and inscribed on the walls behind that are the words, "Father, forgive."

For almost 50 years now, reconciliation, forgiveness, and unity have been at the heart of Coventry Cathedral's ministry. The Coventry Cross of Nails has become for many a symbol of forgiveness, reconciliation, and peace.

How much of the current pain, heartache, violence, hatred, destruction, and waste of human and material resources in the world is due to the inability of people to sacrifice, to be reconciled, and to forgive? **On a personal and international scale how**

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<sup>2</sup> Bausch, World of Stories, 388-389.

**important are the ability to sacrifice – to give up something that is important, beneficial, or valuable to us (our Onesimus), to reach out to those who we have hurt or who have hurt us, and the willingness to forgive?**

The ability to do these things as Christians, in the spirit of Christ, not in anger, bitterness or resentment brings tremendous benefit to us and to others.

The inability or unwillingness to do these things leads to broken relationships, bad or no communication, brokenness, enmity, even violence and bloodshed – which we see every day.

Our appreciation of Paul who be poorer if we didn't have this little letter that expresses so simply and with such dignity the value and importance of reconciliation. And we are grateful that Philemon forgave Onesimus and welcomed him back, which I am sure he did otherwise the letter never would have been saved in the first place!

**Blessing:** The grace of the Lord Jesus be with your spirit. Philemon 25