

Philemon: Dealing with Conflict in God's Family

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Introduction



Introduction

How to use the "Philemon: Dealing with Conflict in God's Family" quarterly series by ChristianBibleStudies.com.

Why read this book?

C. S. Lewis said "Everyone says that forgiveness is a wonderful idea/until he has something to forgive." Forgiveness is not always easy to ask for or to give. Someone has to swallow the pain of having been hurt. Philemon is a letter that gives us a case study in the cost of asking for forgiveness and of granting it.

Who wrote this book?

The apostle Paul, imprisoned in Rome, wrote it between A.D. 60 and 62.

To whom was it written?

Philemon, a wealthy Christian in the church at Colosse, who may have become a believer through Paul's ministry (v. 19).

Why was it written?

During Paul's first imprisonment in Rome (A.D. 59 to 62), he met Onesimus, a runaway slave, and led him to faith in Christ (v. 10). Onesimus might have been a great help to him, but Paul chose to send him back to his master, Philemon. Paul wrote this letter to ask Philemon to forgive Onesimus. This letter was likely carried by Tychicus, who was also carrying letters to the Ephesian and Colossian churches (Eph. 6:21–22; Col. 4:7–9). Onesimus traveled with Tychicus.

What to look for in Philemon:

A plea for grace. Most runaway slaves, if caught, faced harsh punishment and sometimes even death. Paul hoped Philemon would become a living illustration of the grace Onesimus had already received through Christ.



Work Out Conflict in Christ-centered Community

Leader's Guide

Leader's Guide

Work Out Conflict in Christ-centered Community

Remember the ties that bind.

What if one of your most trusted workers embezzled \$20,000 from a business account and fled to the Cayman Islands, only to return a few weeks later with empty pockets and a forlorn look on his face to ask for your forgiveness. Would you be hurt? Absolutely! How would you deal with the betrayal? How are any of us able to look past wrongs done and accept the wrongdoer as Christ accepts us? Paul's letter to Philemon is a message of forgiveness, second chances, and mercy; a message about equality in Christ and the power of the gospel to transcend social boundaries; a message about grace.



Scripture: Philemon 1-7

Based On: "Calling on Family Support," by Steve Aurell, PreachingToday.com



Work Out Conflict in Christ-centered Community

Leader's Guide

Part 1 Identify the Issue

Note to Leader: Provide each person with the Participant's Guide, included at the end of this study.

Philemon was one of Paul's converts who lived in Colossae. In 62 A.D., a crime occurred in Philemon's household. Paul was under house arrest in Rome at the time, awaiting trial before Caesar. Although in chains, he was able to preach the gospel to those who came to him, including a fugitive named Onesimus.

Onesimus was one of sixty million slaves who shouldered the weight of the Roman Empire in those days, and in Rome slavery was particularly brutal. Before Onesimus fled, he had most likely stolen something from his master, Philemon. So Onesimus was not only a fugitive, but a thief as well—a candidate for branding, or worse, if he were ever caught and returned.

Onesimus's freedom would not have felt very free with fear restricting his every move. Fortunately for him, God had a freedom waiting that was beyond anything Onesimus could have dreamt possible. Through his contact with Paul, Onesimus was introduced to the Savior. The shackles of fear and shame tumbled to the ground. In Christ, he found forgiveness.

Freedom in Christ doesn't absolve us from our earthly debts and responsibilities, and Paul knew that although Onesimus's slate had been wiped clean before God, Onesimus needed to make things right with Philemon. With these issues on the table, Paul sat down and wrote this letter for Onesimus himself to hand deliver to Philemon, his former master. Paul sought to resolve this conflict God's way. As Christians, our healing and growth take place in, and not apart from, the body of Christ. Paul begins to till the soil around Philemon's heart by appealing to a Christ-centered conflict resolution.

Discussion Questions:

[Q] How have you observed conflicts resolved in church communities? What were good methods? What were bad—even ugly—methods?

[Q] Think about a time you were betrayed. How did you feel? What thoughts went through your mind?

[Q] Think about a time you wronged, or were wronged by, a brother or sister in Christ. How was the situation resolved? If it hasn't been resolved, what stands in the way?



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Optional Activity:

Purpose: *To consider a Christ-centered response to resolving conflict.*

Activity: *Tell your group that it's "Dear Abby" time. Ask each of them to describe in writing a real, or potentially real, conflict between believers. When they are finished, collect and read their accounts. Then, let the group play the role of "Dear Abby." Ask: How would you start to resolve this conflict in a Christ-centered way?*

Part 2 Discover the Eternal Principles

Teaching Point One: Christ-centered conflict resolution is based in family unity.

Why does Paul address the whole church on what seems to be a private affair? Our society today values the right to privacy above everything else. "Who are *they* to tell me what to do or how to behave?" is a response we often hear. Most wouldn't appreciate others being privy to a personal matter concerning the correction of an unfaithful worker, the discipline of a runaway daughter, or the treatment of an alcoholic husband. Even within the church, people would view these as invasions of privacy.

But Paul approaches things differently. He assumes that Christians live and act within the context of community—whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. When we are joined in Christ, we are joined to one another. Read the first three verses of Philemon.

- [Q] What do these verses tell you about Christian community? How would you describe our relationships as Christians if this were the only Scripture you had?
- [Q] Considering the situation, why might Paul start his letter to Philemon this way?
- [Q] What would Paul's "Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ" mean to you if he had written this letter to you?
- [Q] How would you respond to a letter containing the details of your conflict with another believer being read in your church—with the expectation that the church would help you resolve the conflict? Would you be offended? Relieved? Somewhere in between? Why?



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Teaching Point Two: Christ-centered conflict resolution is based in family encouragement.

Paul appeals to family encouragement as a bridge to conflict resolution. In the confines of his jail cell, Paul must have had plenty of time to pray and give thanks. Solitude has a way of minimizing distractions, allowing those things of real value to float to the surface of our awareness. But Paul did more than pray. He also had his ear toward the believing community, which often brought new occasions for prayer and thanksgiving.

Epaphras, who pastored the church in Colossae, was now with Paul in his imprisonment. From him, Paul would have heard news concerning Philemon's great hospitality and generosity. Then he met Onesimus, the fugitive slave, from whom Paul would have learned more of Philemon's character and breadth of ministry. At every mention of Philemon's name, Paul would lift his heart in gratitude for a life so affected by the saving influences of grace: "I am so grateful for you. Whenever I think of you, I thank my God." What great words of encouragement! Read verses 4–5.

- [Q] Why might Paul have begun his letter to Philemon with words of affirmation?
- [Q] What kind of man was Philemon according to these verses?
- [Q] When has encouragement from another believer spurred you on to even greater deeds of faith and love?
- [Q] What brother or sister in Christ could use your encouragement today?

Teaching Point Three: Christ-centered conflict resolution is based in family service.

Read verses 6–7.

Paul acknowledges Philemon's track record as a servant. He is not praying for success in Philemon's evangelistic or pastoral work, nor is he referring to witnessing to non-believers, although the way in which we treat one another is a powerful witness to those outside the church. The burden of Paul's prayer is for Philemon to share the same love and faith with respect to Onesimus, who is in need of Philemon's forgiveness and help. He prays that the fellowship, or the sharing and generosity, of Philemon's faith would become effective, or active, as he realizes the knowledge of every good thing which is in him for Christ's sake. In other words, Paul is saying, "Philemon, the moral insight is within you. I have seen your love and faith at work. Now I am praying that you would make it active in this situation."



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Leader's Guide

[Q] How would faith in action (forgiveness of Onesimus) give the already-faithful Philemon “a full understanding of every good thing we have in Christ”?

[Q] How is the situation with Onesimus different from the other times Philemon had “refreshed the hearts of the saints”?

[Q] When it comes to loving other believers, when have you said, “Yes, Lord, but it’s different with this person”?

[Q] What conflict are you experiencing where it’s hard to get beyond head knowledge of God’s commands to an active love and faith? How could your church family help you get there?

Teaching Point Four: Christ-centered conflict resolution is based in brotherhood.

As Philemon reads Paul’s words, he will learn that Onesimus is also “a dear brother,” and that in sending him back, Paul is sending his “very heart.” Will Philemon allow that to soak in? Will he allow it to penetrate those areas of his own heart that have been wounded by Onesimus? Paul believes he will. The word “brother” then comes as a fitting climax, showing how deeply Paul loves this man and how he sees them tied together in a single strand of brotherhood in Christ.

[Q] What would it mean to Philemon that Paul calls both him and Onesimus “brother,” considering that Onesimus was Philemon’s slave?

[Q] How does Paul model brotherly love at this point in the letter?

[Q] We don’t know the end of the story, but how do you hope Philemon received Onesimus in the end?

[Q] What does it mean that when it comes to other believers we are “tied to a single strand of brotherhood in Christ”?

[Q] What does the title of “brother” (or sister) mean for you as you interact with the body of Christ this week?



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Part 3 Apply Your Findings

Is your commitment to Christ reflected in the quality of your relational ties? It's only when the ties that bind us together are stronger than the forces that would tear us apart that we stand a chance of resolving conflict in a healthy way. God created us to work out our struggles within the framework of community. It's impossible to be spiritually alive while disconnected from the body. This means there is no longer any room to think in terms of you as an individual totally separate from me. We have been joined together in Christ in order to learn how to work together, so that every individual part will benefit from all the others. To the degree that genuine love and mutual respect undergird our relational foundation, conflicts will be resolved and begin to fade away.

Action Point: Share a conflict you're having with another believer (no need to give names). Ask your small group to pray for you and help you toward Christ-centered resolution. If things are smooth sailing right now, pray for someone who is struggling in a conflict and plan a time to encourage him or her with a note, a phone call, or a chat over coffee.

—Study by Steve Aurell, with Kyle White



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Part 2 Discover the Eternal Principles

Teaching Point One: Christ-centered conflict resolution is based in family unity.

Teaching Point Two: Christ-centered conflict resolution is based in family encouragement.

Teaching Point Three: Christ-centered conflict resolution is based in family service.

Teaching Point Four: Christ-centered conflict resolution is based in brotherhood.



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Is your commitment to Christ reflected in the quality of your relational ties? It's only when the ties that bind us together are stronger than the forces that would tear us apart that we stand a chance of resolving conflict in a healthy way. God created us to work out our struggles within the framework of community. It's impossible to be spiritually alive while disconnected from the body. This means there is no longer any room to think in terms of you as an individual totally separate from me. We have been joined together in Christ in order to learn how to work together, so that every individual part will benefit from all the others. To the degree that genuine love and mutual respect undergird our relational foundation, conflicts will be resolved and begin to fade away.

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—Study by Steve Aurell, with Kyle White



Only God Can Change Our Hearts

Leader's Guide

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Only God Can Change Our Hearts

God is the only healer.

As humans we are limited in our capacity to effect change in our relationships. We can say all the right things and model all the right perspectives, but unless God empowers the change, we may as well try to catch the wind. Somehow we get this idea that it's possible to do what only God can do. Like a mechanic fixing cars, we start spending immeasurable energy trying to fix people.

Counselors call this codependency, a phrase that defines the tendency of some to be a "savior" to others.

But when "saviors" fail in their attempts to effect change in others, they may feel they've betrayed God's purpose for their lives. They may even get a little critical when the outcome doesn't measure up to their expectations. Only God has the power to change hearts.



Scripture: [Philemon 8–20](#)

Based On: "Trusting in God's Process," by Steve Aurell, [PreachingToday.com](#)



Only God Can Change Our Hearts

Leader's Guide

Part 1 Identify the Issue

Note to Leader: Provide each person with the *Participant's Guide*, included at the end of this study.

Coco was a pit-bull mix, just barely one year old. As a puppy she was dumped on the freeway and rescued by a teenager who handed her off to another friend, who eventually gave her to yet another friend, who then left her in the hands of an animal shelter. When Clayton and Deanna laid eyes on the homeless dog, it was love at first sight. With three soaring hearts and one wagging tail, they brought their newly adopted pet into a loving home at last.

It wasn't long, however, before they discovered a secret: Coco had issues. With Clayton and Deanna, Coco was loving and obedient; with other people she was hostile and aggressive. They hired a dog trainer who specialized in aggressive breeds and over the next few weeks, Coco stopped fighting with other animals. No more random barking. No more racing through the house. No more digging in the yard. For months they trained Coco faithfully and witnessed with delight her gradual transformation. Their story seemed destined for a happy ending—except for one thing: Coco remained hostile towards other people. Clayton and Deanna had to keep her penned in the yard when anyone came over for dinner. On walks they had to keep her on a tight choke collar, muzzled, and away from children. In fact, Coco's aggression was so strong, it soon became unlikely that any additional training would help. Despite their best efforts, Clayton and Deanna came to the realization they couldn't keep her. After much prayer and discussion, they made a hard decision. They had done all they could to save this dog. Now exhausted, they chose to do the responsible thing, however heartbreaking it was.

This story illustrates a foundational principle, one that underlies Paul's entire appeal to Philemon: Only God has the power to change hearts. Our responsibility is to speak the truth and to love others with the power of Christ. This is not to suggest that we shouldn't help others grow. Surely we can provide others with encouragement and support and point them in the right direction. But if the child is ever to learn how to pedal, steer, and balance alone on a bicycle, we must eventually let go of the handlebars. We have to give others the freedom to learn for themselves the obedience Christ requires, and trust God's process in them.

Paul understood these tendencies well. In his letter to Philemon, we see how he applies the antidote. Paul is mediating a potentially explosive situation between two brothers in Christ—Onesimus, a runaway slave, and Philemon, Onesimus's master—yet Paul has no interest in lording his authority over them or winning their obedience through compulsion. His only desire is to empower those he loves to develop their own sense of moral responsibility.



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Leader's Guide

Discussion Questions:

[Q] Think about a time you experienced life change. What dynamics, people, or environment were involved in that change?

[Q] When has someone tried to “fix” you? How did you like that?

[Q] When have you tried to “fix” someone? How did that go? What was his or her response?

Part 2 Discover the Eternal Principles

Teaching Point One: We make way for God's change process when we hold our rights loosely.

Read verses 8–9 of Philemon.

In his appeal to Philemon, Paul is first willing to surrender his authority before the greater demand of love. In other words, he holds his rights loosely. One can give good advice without being authoritative. Some may obey out of respect to the one giving the advice or out of fear of punishment for failing to comply. Paul would prefer that Christians do what is good because it's the right thing to do for the Lord.

Slaves were viewed as personal possessions, and Philemon would have been expected to take revenge on one who had run away, but what was accepted in that culture was at odds with Christian morality. Paul assumes that Philemon, as a Christian who knows God's love, will show the same love and forgiveness in his grievance against Onesimus. In this way, love becomes the virtue that forms the basis of Paul's appeal. He doesn't use the language of fear and guilt; that would reduce Philemon to the level of a slave himself. The spiritual authority we have in Christ is not found in a position or a title but in love's service.

[Q] What credentials and authority could Paul have invoked with Philemon in order to straighten out the mess with Onesimus?

[Q] What does Paul believe Philemon ought to do, and what surrender will this require from Philemon?



Only God Can Change Our Hearts

Leader's Guide

[Q] What other Scripture can you recall that abolishes the “pecking order”?

[Q] Are there relationships where you, like Paul, need to surrender your authority for the greater demand of love? What might happen if you did?

Teaching Point Two: We make way for God's change process when we consider the mutual benefit.

Read verses 9–14 and 20.

Paul eases the tension of the situation with a play on Onesimus's name, which literally means *useful* in the Greek. By saying Onesimus was “formerly useless, but now is useful,” Paul highlights the difference the gospel makes in a person's life. Though Onesimus had run away from Philemon, he unwittingly ran smack into the Lord. As a result, what he once was, he no longer is. His true identity is now anchored in Christ.

Onesimus had also been of practical use to Paul. As an aged prisoner, Paul needed others to take care of his basic needs—to fix his food, run his errands, and keep him company. So useful had he become that Paul refers to Onesimus as his “very heart.” In verse 20, Paul makes another play on Onesimus's name: “that I may have some *benefit* from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in Christ.” Paul is indirectly requesting that Philemon refresh his heart as he has others by accepting Onesimus back as a brother. This phrase reflects Paul's conviction that all of one's actions should be directed to benefit others. Although his personal preference would be to keep Onesimus with him, Paul puts aside his own wishes out of consideration for Philemon's rights and feelings. By sending Onesimus back—his child, his very heart—Paul demonstrates the selfless love he wishes to instill in Philemon.

[Q] How does Paul describe Onesimus in this passage? What does this suggest about Christ's work in Onesimus's life?

[Q] What would obedience to Christ by all involved here look like (Philemon, Onesimus, Paul, the church)?

[Q] How would obedience by all involved be of mutual benefit? List the ways.

[Q] What relationships require your love and/or forgiveness—the sooner the better? How would everyone benefit from an obedient move on your part?



Only God Can Change Our Hearts

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Teaching Point Three: We make way for God's change process when we reflect on God's purposes.

Danny grew up in church, but to hear him tell it, “couldn't understand why folks were so nice and courteous on Sunday and yet so nasty every other day of the week.” As a result, he became disillusioned with the Christian faith. At a young and impressionable age, Danny rejected his family and community to join the ranks of the hippies along the Big Sur coastline. It was there, in the midst of God's natural creation, that the Lord moved in his heart.

This is not a unique story; many of us have had similar experiences. Looking back, it's easy to chuckle at the irony of God's timing. But what do you think Danny's parents were experiencing as they watched their son leave home? Do you think their hearts burned with the desire to bring him back? To warn him against the dangers he was facing? Do you think they were tempted to use their parental influence to protect him from harm? Probably so! But at some point they must have realized their limitations and become willing to place their son into God's hands. They must have also allowed the pain of that rejection to find resolution in God's forgiveness.

Danny eventually returned to a church community and is now one of the most sought after worship leaders in the country. None of us can plumb the depths of God's ways, but what we see here is the mysterious providence of God at work. We can't straighten out our own paths or the paths of others, but God can. He can change the worst-case scenario for the good, healing hearts and mending relationships along the way.

Read verses 15–16.

[Q] How do you see God's “mysterious providence” at work throughout the letter to Philemon?

[Q] What effect would “reflecting on God's purposes” have upon this conflict between Onesimus and Philemon?

[Q] What does it mean to you that “even our darkest moments, our deepest despair or most destructive choices have some meaning in God's sight”? What does it tell you about God?



Only God Can Change Our Hearts

Leader's Guide

Optional Activity:

Purpose: *To recognize God's mysterious providence in each others' stories.*

Activity: *It's sad how involved we can be with people and still not know their stories. Take time as a group to share testimonies of God's pursuit and rescue of you! But don't stop there—share where your trajectory would probably have taken you had God not intervened. To close, take some time to pray and thank God, the Mysterious Provider.*

Part 3 Apply Your Findings

How can we apply what we've learned to our own relational conflicts? First of all, in the same way that Paul surrenders his rights, we need to get pride and inappropriate control out of the way. This doesn't mean we stop speaking truth, or communicating appropriate boundaries, or pointing others toward Christ. It does mean that we allow others the dignity to decide for themselves how they will obey Christ. This challenges us to rely on the Lord's assurance that he is in control and that he loves his children.

Second, examine your motivation. Take a moral inventory. Is selfishness or humility fueling your responses? In his appeal to Philemon, Paul is modeling his words to the Philippian believers: "Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit," he tells them, "but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others" (Phil. 2:3–4). Conflicts arise when there are at least two people promoting competing agendas. This kind of conflict cannot exist when each is concerned about the interests of the other. When we stop looking out for ourselves and start seeking agreement, the issue is no longer "What do I want?" but "How can I help?" Being "right" becomes less important than being united in a single purpose.

Finally, seek God's perspective. The question is not what *they* need to learn but what *I* need to learn from God. Perhaps God has placed us in the midst of conflict for a reason—to reveal what needs to be changed in our hearts or to help us learn to rely on his resources. Maybe it's to teach us a deeper lesson in humility, acceptance, or grace.



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Action Point: As a group, write a psalm of thanksgiving to God for the ways you've seen him change hearts! One way to do this is to pass a sheet around the group. Each member writes a line or two of thanksgiving, then folds it back. The next person won't see what was written, but writes down his or her own lines of thanksgiving, and so on around the circle. When all are done, read the entries as one psalm.

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Teaching Point One: We make way for God's change process when we hold our rights loosely.

Teaching Point Two: We make way for God's change process when we consider the mutual benefit.

Teaching Point Three: We make way for God's change process when we reflect on God's purposes.

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The Time to Reconcile Is Now

Leader's Guide

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The Time to Reconcile Is Now

Bless as you have been blessed.

The apostle Paul has been mediating a rift between two believers, and we find he sets a high premium on face-to-face reconciliation. So, he sends Onesimus back to Philemon for resolution. Onesimus had wronged Philemon in his own home, but he is now willing to return and make amends at whatever cost to himself. Paul is confident that Philemon will care for the slave's spiritual needs. The time for reconciliation is always now.



Scripture: Philemon 17–25

Based On: "Moving Toward Reconciliation," by Steve Aurell, PreachingToday.com



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Part 1 Identify the Issue

Note to Leader: Provide each person with the *Participant's Guide*, included at the end of this study.

Victor Hugo's novel *Les Misérables* is a story about Jean Valjean, who was sentenced to a 19-year prison term for stealing a loaf of bread. During his imprisonment, Valjean hardened into a tough convict. No one could beat him in a fight. No one could break his will. Valjean finally earned his release, but found he had nowhere to go. He wandered through the village seeking shelter until a generous bishop had mercy on him. That night, after the bishop and his sister fell asleep, Valjean rose from his bed, rummaged through the house, and crept off into the darkness with the family silver. Three policemen knocked on the bishop's door the next morning with Valjean in hand. They had caught him with the stolen silver and were ready to send him back to prison for life.

But the bishop responded in a way no one expected: "So here you are!" he said to Valjean. "I'm delighted to see you! Had you forgotten that I gave you the candlesticks as well? They're silver like the rest, and worth a good 200 francs. Did you forget to take them?" Valjean was startled and stared at the old man with an expression no words could convey. Valjean was no thief, the bishop told the policemen: "This silver was my gift to him."

When the policemen left, the bishop gave the candlesticks to his guest, who was now speechless and trembling. "Do not forget, do not ever forget," said the bishop. "You have promised to use the money to make yourself an honest man." The power of the bishop's act, which defied every human instinct for revenge, changed Valjean's life forever. A naked encounter with forgiveness melted the granite defenses of his soul. He kept the candlesticks as a precious memento of grace and dedicated himself from then on to helping others in need.

This story from Victor Hugo's novel illustrates the reconciliation process Paul believes Philemon will follow in regard to his runaway slave Onesimus.

Discussion Questions:

- [Q] Did you ever steal anything as a kid? What happened next?
- [Q] Tell about a time you had to reconcile with someone. What was the process? How did it go? What were the benefits of doing so?
- [Q] When you think of the word *reconcile*, what comes to mind?



The Time to Reconcile Is Now

Leader's Guide

Optional Activity:

Purpose: *To explore the concept of grace.*

Activity: *Fire up the popcorn maker! Watch the film Les Miserables as a small group. Or, before your small group, utilize the clip from the movie that brings this book passage to life. You can find a Les Miserables study guide for your discussion at: <http://store.yahoo.com/biblestudies/lesminew.html>*

Part 2 Discover the Eternal Principles

Teaching Point One: Christ-centered reconciliation requires accepting the person.

In the act of exclusion, we divide the world into “us” and “them,” “master” and “slave,” the “righteous” and “unrighteous.” But Christ came as the great wall remover. His death broke down barriers, dismantling the walls of hostility that had separated categories of people since the beginning of time. Any study of Jesus’ life must convince us that whatever barriers we need to overcome to treat people with equality will never compare to what he overcame when he descended to join us on earth.

When Jesus encountered a guilt-ridden person, he saw a child who had strayed. He understood that so much of our suffering results from us being fallen people. He could have said, “They made their bed, let them lie in it,” but he didn’t. Instead he chose to see through the surface of dirt and grime. Read verse 17.

[Q] Paul appeals to his partnership with Philemon as a reason to welcome Onesimus. Why would this be compelling in this situation?

[Q] What would it mean for Philemon to welcome his runaway slave Onesimus as he would Paul?

[Q] What does Paul’s request tell you about the kingdom of God?

[Q] What prejudices exist in the church today? How have you seen them cause conflict?

[Q] What barriers have caused you not to be welcoming, or accepting of, other believers? How could you overcome those barriers?



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Teaching Point Two: Christ-centered reconciliation requires forgiving the wrong.

Read verses 18–20.

When it comes to forgiveness, we probably agree that it's a beautiful idea—until we have to practice it. In the Lord's Prayer, Jesus links our own need for forgiveness with our willingness to forgive others. This doesn't mean that God's forgiveness is dependent on our forgiving others first, but we should never expect to receive what we are unwilling to give. Forgiving those who have wounded us is not as easy as flipping a light switch—it's tough! Author and pastor Henri Nouwen described the process at work:

I have often said, "I forgive you," but even as I said the words, my heart remained angry and resentful. I still wanted to hear the story that tells me I was right after all; I still wanted to hear apologies and excuses; I still wanted the satisfaction of receiving some praise in return—if only the praise for being so forgiving! But God's forgiveness is unconditional; it comes from a heart that doesn't demand anything for itself, a heart that is completely empty of self-seeking. It is this divine forgiveness that I have to practice in my daily life. It calls me to keep stepping over all my arguments that say forgiveness is unwise, unhealthy, and impractical. It challenges me to step over my needs for gratitude and compliments. Finally it demands that I step over that wounded part of my heart that feels hurt and wronged, that wants to stay in control and put a few conditions between me and the one whom I am asked to forgive.

[Q] What hits you most about Nouwen's description of forgiveness?

[Q] Why does Paul step in to settle any debts for Onesimus?

[Q] Why might he say "not to mention that you owe me your very self"?

[Q] What would forgiveness look like, practically, for Philemon and Onesimus?

[Q] What would it look like to go from idyllic concept to tough reality?

Teaching Point Three: Christ-centered reconciliation requires bestowing a blessing.

Loving actions communicate in unmistakable terms the reality of our forgiveness and commitment to reconciliation. Thomas Edison understood this principle well. It took hundreds of hours for him and his staff to manufacture a single incandescent light bulb. One day, after finishing a bulb, he handed it to a young errand boy and asked him to take it upstairs to the testing room. As the boy turned and started up the stairs, he stumbled and fell, and the bulb shattered on the steps.



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Instead of lecturing the boy, Edison reassured him and then told his staff to start working on another bulb. When it was completed several days later, Edison powerfully demonstrated the reality of his forgiveness. He walked over to the same boy, handed him the bulb, and said, "Please take this up to the testing room." Imagine how that boy must have felt. He knew that he didn't deserve to be trusted with this responsibility again. Yet here it was, being offered as though nothing had ever happened. Nothing could have restored this boy to the team more clearly, more quickly, or more fully. To bless those who have hurt us, deprived us of something, or in some way handicapped us, is the most extraordinary work any of us will ever do. Read verses 21–22.

[Q] What do you think Paul had in mind when he said that Philemon would "do even more" than he asked in this situation?

[Q] When have you seen restoration and blessing in the midst of conflict in the church?

[Q] Whom do you need to restore and bestow a blessing upon?

Part 3 Apply Your Findings

During World War I, a German soldier ducked into an out-of-the-way foxhole. There he found a wounded enemy. The fallen soldier was soaked with blood and only minutes from his death. Touched by the man's plight, the German soldier offered him water. Through this small kindness a bond was created. The dying man pointed to his shirt pocket, so the German soldier took out a wallet and removed some family pictures. He then held them up so the wounded man could look upon his loved ones one final time. With bullets raging over them and war all around, these two enemies were, for a moment, friends.

What happened in that foxhole? Did all war cease to exist? Were all wrongs made right? No. What happened was simply this: two enemies saw each other as humans in need of help. This is forgiveness. Forgiveness begins by rising above the war, looking beyond the uniform, and choosing to see the other, not as a foe or even as a friend, but simply as a fellow soldier longing to make it home safely.

What about you? Is there a wounded soldier in your path that God is calling you to care for? Then go, be reconciled, and "forgive one another, just as God in Christ has forgiven you."



The Time to Reconcile Is Now

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Action Point: The time to reconcile is now. Is there anyone with whom you need to reconcile? If so, take some time to write a letter to that person to start the reconciliation process. If not, spend your time praying. In either case, think about someone who needs your blessing—especially someone who might be hard to welcome or accept. Could your small group bless him or her together? How?

—Study by Steve Aurell, with Kyle White



The Time to Reconcile Is Now

Participant's Guide

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The Time to Reconcile Is Now

Bless as you have been blessed.

The apostle Paul has been mediating a rift between two believers, and we find he sets a high premium on face-to-face reconciliation. So, he sends Onesimus back to Philemon for resolution. Onesimus had wronged Philemon in his own home, but he is now willing to return and make amends at whatever cost to himself. Paul is confident that Philemon will care for the slave's spiritual needs. The time for reconciliation is always now.



Scripture: Philemon 17–25

Based On: "Moving Toward Reconciliation," by Steve Aurell, PreachingToday.com



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