

Biblical Conflict Resolution, Part 12 | a case study in Philemon

I. Introduction

- The letter to Philemon is all about reconciling relationships between Christians.
- The recipient of the letter was Philemon, and it appears that at some point in the past, he had a servant named Onesimus.
- There's something really interesting about Onesimus' name, and—if you know about it—it helps you appreciate some word play Paul uses in the letter. Onesimus' name literally means “useful.” Keep that in mind.
- At some point in the past, Onesimus had apparently stolen from Philemon and fled Colossae.
- In God's providence, it appears that at some time while Paul was under arrest in Rome, Onesimus met him and became a Christian.
- Paul apparently wrote this letter to Philemon at the same time he wrote the letter to the Colossians and gave it to Onesimus to carry back to Philemon.
- In the letter itself, Paul appealed to Philemon to accept Onesimus back into his household, but instead of merely bringing him back in as a servant, Paul wanted Philemon to accept Onesimus back as a brother in the Lord.

II. Greeting (vv. 1-3)

- Though Apphia and Archippus are mentioned, this letter really is focused on Philemon.

III. Philemon's Love and Faith (vv. 4-6)

- Even though this was written to Philemon, there are many points of application for modern day Christians and—most specifically—you and your family.
 - First, God desires for everyone in your family to love the Lord and all of the saints.
 - Second, God also desires you to have faith toward the Lord and for all the saints.
- It's very important to understand that nothing that follows can be accomplished if we don't love God and love each other and if we don't have faith in God and in each other.
- This should remind you of the steps we've taken to prepare our worldviews. We have to be thinking rightly about and relating correctly to God, His plan, and His purposes for us.

IV. Paul's Plea for Onesimus

- vv. 8-9
 - Please note that Paul could have commanded Philemon to do everything that comes next. And, in other books, Paul does command the saints to do that which he's going to admonish Philemon to do.
 - However, Paul would prefer for Philemon to do what's right without having to be commanded. This is only ever possible when a person is motivated by love and faith.
 - Commands, threats, and punishment are only necessary when people refuse to live in a loving relationship with each other.
 - We wouldn't need laws and rules if we loved God and each other the way we should. The first and greatest commandments are the very fulfillment of every other law of man. This is why Augustine said, “*Love God and do whatever you want.*”
 - Everything that is to follow genuinely is a command. It's an expectation of God, but I pray your family will respond to it as Philemon did . . . willingly. That will produce the most beautiful and genuine reconciliation.

- vv. 9-11
 - There is clear word-play based off Onesimus' name. Though his name meant "useful," Onesimus' life choices had been useless to Philemon. But now Onesimus was equipped in Christ to live up to his name.
- vv. 12-16
 - It's important to note that Paul is saying a lot of things that are designed to turn Philemon's eyes back on his own life—in order to search out any potential logs of sin that may be hidden from him.
 - This is why—in part—Apphia and Archippus are named. They too potentially needed to grant forgiveness and be reconciled with Onesimus, or Paul was hoping they would provide accountability and assistance to Philemon as he navigated the process.
 - Now, what comes next is a really beautiful truth and the crux of this episode. Paul believes that no matter how close Paul and Onesimus had become in the past, Philemon and Onesimus could have been closer. That should be obvious. Not only could any good relationship get better with time, but conflict so easily destroys relationships if we let it.
 - But God allows conflict to come into our relationships in order to strengthen those relationships in Him. This is part of preparing our worldview. We absolutely need to understand the biblical truths being taught in these verses.
 - There would have been no hope for Onesimus outside of God, but in Christ Philemon and Onesimus' relationship could have become "beloved" both physically and spiritually.
 - And here's the kicker, what Paul is communicating here is that Philemon and Onesimus had the potential of having a *better* and *closer* relationship than Paul and Onesimus directly due to the fact that they were navigating conflict.
 - The sweetest Christian relationships are always a byproduct of conflict. But such relationships can on be achieved by working through that conflict in a Christ-honoring way.
 - Paul is saying that God's eternal purpose for the conflict is that their relationship could now be closer than it ever could have been before. Yes, conflict was part of the problem, but the cure that comes through biblical conflict resolution produces a relationship that is far stronger that it ever could have been.
 - Now, a few points about this before we finish the letter.
 - This truth should never motivate us to sin.
 - We should never run from conflicted relationships until we've attempted to reconcile. The world would have us immediately cut off "toxic" relationships, but in Matthew 18, Jesus says that it's always worth doing the work to win your brother.
 - Be encouraged that God wants to use the conflict to create a stronger relationship between the two of you.
- vv. 17-25
 - Paul's confidence in Philemon's obedience was refreshing. And it's also really powerful how Paul was willing to do whatever it took to help them through the reconciliation process.
 - That's one of the final points of biblical conflict resolution—get help. Just as we learned in Matthew 18, if the individual won't reconcile with you when you approach them one on one, it's very important to bring along some help.
 - Start with your pastor. If he won't or can't do it, find a mature believer in your church to walk with you through this process. And if you can't find any of them, please reach out to a biblical counselor—like Faithtree Biblical Counseling & Discipleship.