

A RECONCILING GOSPEL

+ **SESSION IN A SENTENCE:**

Paul pleaded for Philemon to be reconciled with Onesimus, modeling the reconciliation Christ has extended to us.

+ **BACKGROUND PASSAGES:**

Philemon; 2 Corinthians 5

+ **SETTING:**

As we've studied how the church has grown in caring for each other, despite their differences, we see that Christ is the reconciling factor. The passages today will focus on how God reconciled us to Christ and calls us now to the ministry of reconciliation. In a world with so much brokenness, so many ex-friends, and so many wounded hearts, we have a call from God to get our hands dirty (not sinful) bringing people together for the sake of Christ's kingdom. Anybody can be part of what pulls this world apart, but every Christian is called to be part of God's grace in putting it back together.

DAY 1

READ:

2 Corinthians 5:18-19

FOCAL PASSAGE:

2 Corinthians 5:18

NOTES



KEY DOCTRINE #61:

CHRIST AS RECONCILIATION

Ever since the fall of the first man and woman in the garden of Eden, God and human beings have been estranged. Sin resulted not only in an estranged relationship with God but also in enmity between God and humanity. Sin is an infinite offense against an infinite God. Thankfully, God loves His enemies and has sent Christ to be the reconciler between us and God. Through Christ's death, God provides the means whereby that broken relationship is restored and renewed (Romans 6:23; 2 Corinthians 5:18-19).

From the gracious and mighty hand of God, we have been given an immense privilege to serve Him in this world. We have been given what Paul called the ministry of reconciliation. We are called to image Christ in serving others, to be reconciled to God and to one another. Through the power of forgiveness found in the gospel, we are to work for the reconciliation of all things, just as Jesus does.

We do not do this as payment for our reconciliation in Christ. We can never repay God for His grace. It wouldn't then be grace but merit. Rather, we work as ministers of reconciliation out of the deep love we have received in Christ. We know what it is like to be reconciled to God, so we labor to bring others into saving knowledge of the gospel. We know what it is like to be separated from friends or family, so we labor to bring others back into a restored relationship.

Our solid relationships, founded on our shared love of Christ, are radiant to the watching world. It shows the kind of Savior we have—One that makes ex-friends friends again.

What is your next step in becoming a minister of reconciliation?

DAY 2

READ:

2 Corinthians 5:19-20

FOCAL PASSAGE:

2 Corinthians 5:19

NOTES

The basis for our work as ministers of reconciliation is founded upon the work of Christ on the cross. In 2 Corinthians 5:19, Paul explained that, through Christ, God was reconciling the world to Himself by forgiving our sin, and as a result He has committed the message of reconciliation to us.

We start with the definition of reconciliation. Paul defines it as “not counting their trespasses against them.” In other words, there are real trespasses that separate us from God (Isaiah 59:2). We have sinned against God, and as a holy God, that causes Him to remove His presence from us. But God got involved. Instead of counting our trespasses against us, He put all our trespasses upon His Son at the cross. Jesus bore the penalty for our sins to bring us back to God.

Now that we have been reconciled to God, we are commissioned as ministers of reconciliation. We begin with the message of reconciliation. The gospel tells the story of how God set us right with Himself in Christ, and we carry that message throughout the world. But we do more than that. We actively work to bring that truth to bear on the hearts of our hearers. We labor for their good, to help them understand how to become a minister of reconciliation themselves.

How would you define reconciliation, and how does that definition spur you to serve as a minister of reconciliation?

DAY 3

READ:

Philemon 1-10

FOCAL PASSAGE:

Philemon 9

NOTES

When Paul considered how to make his case to Philemon on behalf of Onesimus, he chose to appeal on the basis of love. As an apostle, he could have commanded Philemon to obey. As a father in the faith, he could have dictated the reception Philemon was to give Onesimus upon his return. Instead, Paul chose to appeal to the love that lived deep within Philemon.

Where did that love come from? It came from Christ. Philemon was a changed man. He was a Christian, and because of that, he had the Holy Spirit living within him. Paul's appeal was an appeal to the love of Christ that dwelt within. It was a call deep inside his heart where there was a power to forgive and receive Onesimus back, not as a slave but as a brother.

That kind of love lives in all who are Christians. And our best appeals to one another come from the place of love with the love of Christ, which stems from Christ, as the focus. If we are to be ministers of reconciliation in a broken world, we must remember the love of Christ that covers a multitude of sins (1 Peter 4:8).

What can we learn about confronting conflict from Paul's method?

DAY 4

READ:

Philemon 11-16

FOCAL PASSAGE:

Philemon 15

NOTES

Sometimes God will do surprising things in our lives. We will endure hardships that we can't understand. We will be rejected by people we thought loved us and cared about us. We will experience injustice that we have no power to do anything about.

In those moments, what hope can we cling to?

We can cling to the hope that God works for our good and His glory in all our circumstances. One day, everything will be restored, and all will be set right when Jesus returns. Until that day, we just never know how God might work some things out in our lives.

Take Philemon as an example. He lost Onesimus, his slave. That cost him something. But as Paul wrote to Philemon, he told Philemon that perhaps he lost Onesimus temporarily so that he could have Onesimus back in a new way permanently. Onesimus ran away as a lost man but came back as a Christian. Philemon lost a slave and gained a brother.

Paul was not condoning slavery in any way. In fact, his letter was written to persuade Philemon to release Onesimus. Paul was counter-cultural for that. No one else in the ancient world would consider what he was proposing as just, but Paul saw things deeper than the world. He saw brothers in Christ on the verge of new freedoms found in forgiveness and reconciliation.

That was not what Philemon expected. And whatever you are facing right now probably has some twist that you don't expect either. Trust God with it and see what kind of glory He has in store.

What surprising thing has God done in your life lately?

VOICES from CHURCH HISTORY

"A change had taken place in him independent of his possible emancipation; in Christ he had become a brother. The 'no longer as a slave' is an absolute fact, whether Philemon chose to recognize it or not."¹

—J. B. Lightfoot (1828–1889)

DAY 5

READ:

Philemon 17-20

FOCAL PASSAGE:

Philemon 18

NOTES

In every attempt at reconciliation, we must remember there is no reconciliation without forgiveness, and there is no forgiveness without a cost. Paul understood this clearly when he wrote to Philemon in verse 18.

Paul knew that Onesimus owed Philemon something after running away and likely taking some money with him. He knew that Philemon would have a hard time getting over those facts. So Paul offered to make restitution himself. He was willing to bear the cost himself.

Now, where did Paul get an idea like that? From Jesus, of course. He was doing what Jesus did for him on the cross. He was taking upon himself the cost of others' sins to bring about reconciliation.

In every ministry of reconciliation, the same principles are true. If we are to be involved at the level God calls us to be, we must be prepared for it to cost us something. We are not called to simply pay the cost of forgiveness for others, but we should be willing to get personally involved at some level to bring the two parties back into a right relationship. After all, that's what Jesus did for us.

How prepared are you to bear some personal cost to serve as a minister of reconciliation?

GROUP

NOTES

VOICES from CHURCH HISTORY

"Can you see how great God's love is for us? Who was the offended party? He was. Who took the first steps toward reconciliation? He did."²

—Chrysostom (c. 347–407)

POINT 1: Reconciliation is born out of love (Philemon 8-14).

Paul sought to gently appeal to Philemon concerning a fellow brother in Christ because of his love.

? From Day 3: **What can we learn about confronting conflict from Paul's method?**

Paul's goal was reconciliation between brothers in Christ that they might be useful for the Lord's ministry.

? **Why is reconciliation between believers important for the Lord's ministry to grow?**

POINT 2: Reconciliation is achieved through Christ (Philemon 15-17; 2 Corinthians 5:18-19).

As we become believers, we are reconciled to God and to each other, welcoming each other as brothers and sisters in Christ.

? **Though we are to treat everyone with love and respect, how is the special bond we have with other believers displayed?**

KEY DOCTRINE #61: CHRIST AS RECONCILIATION

Ever since the fall of the first man and woman in the garden of Eden, God and human beings have been estranged. Sin resulted not only in an estranged relationship with God but also in enmity between God and humanity. Sin is an infinite offense against an infinite God. Thankfully, God loves His enemies and has sent Christ to be the reconciler between us and God. Through Christ's death, God provides the means

whereby that broken relationship is restored and renewed (Romans 6:23; 2 Corinthians 5:18-19).

? How does the ministry of reconciliation play itself out inside the church?

POINT 3: Reconciliation is realized by God's grace (Philemon 18-22).

Like Paul, we are to go above and beyond to help believers be reconciled, even at a cost to ourselves.

? What are some examples of how we can help believers or ourselves be reconciled with others?

Because of His grace, we all owe a debt to Christ and those who have helped us grow in Christ.

? How does knowing Christ paid our debt help us see the importance of reconciliation?

MY RESPONSE

Because we have been given limitless grace through Jesus Christ, we live as agents of reconciliation who reflect the heart of our crucified Savior to others.

- **HEAD:** How does the doctrine of reconciliation change the way you think about God's grace?
- **HEART:** How does the doctrine of reconciliation grow your love for God?
- **HANDS:** How can you become a minister of reconciliation in your community today?



Scan this QR code to access this session's Scripture passages.

VOICES from CHURCH HISTORY

"Christians should do the things that may rejoice the hearts of one another, both people and minister reciprocally, and ministers of their brethren. From the world they expect trouble; and where may they look for comfort and joy but in one another?"³

—Matthew Henry (1662–1714)

JESUS “GETS US IN”

by Daniel Davis

Have you noticed that there are benefits to knowing certain people, or rather, being known by certain people? “Who you know” can open doors for jobs, secure great deals on stuff, and provide access to limited venues. We all like to know someone who can “get us in” to wherever we want to go.

But these benefits are short-lived, especially if we take advantage of who we know too often. Someone doing us a favor one day becomes someone who begrudges the request a few times down the road and may eventually even decline to help because he or she will begin to wonder if the relationship is about the person or about the benefits.

BENEFITS OF FRIENDSHIP

But with Jesus, our relationship with the Person is inextricably tied to the benefits we receive. Because we know Jesus, we have a God-given mission to make disciples of all nations. Because we know Jesus, we have been saved from sin and given eternal life—free of charge, entirely paid for by this “Someone.” And because we know Jesus, we have free access to the most limited of venues—the holy presence of God Himself (Hebrews 4:14-16).

ULTIMATE VIP PASS

Apart from knowing Jesus, no one can stand in God’s presence. Only “the one who has clean hands and a pure heart, who has not set his mind on what is false, and who has not sworn deceitfully” can stand in the Lord’s holy place (Psalm 24:3-4). That’s not me, and I’m certain that’s not you either. But holding on to our confession of Jesus Christ as Lord, this Great High Priest sympathizes with our weaknesses and takes away our sin. And then, He “gets us in.”

“Therefore let us approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us at the proper time” (Hebrews 4:16).

Because we know Jesus, we can enter into the presence of His Father, and ours. But it is not as if we are sneaking into a concert by the scheming of a friend. No, we are approaching boldly the throne of God with nothing to fear because to know Jesus is to know God (“the Son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact expression of His nature,” Hebrews 1:3). This isn’t a security guard waving us through a fence; this is the band driving us in on the tour bus and walking us up on stage before the entire crowd! Let us approach with boldness!



We approach with boldness, but we also do so with humility, for this merciful and gracious God has given us all things in Christ, and we haven't deserved one bit.

BENEFITS IN PERPETUITY

And in this holy presence, we continue to find mercy and forgiveness for our sins, plus we find the grace of God's strength in the Holy Spirit to help us fight against sin. We approach with boldness, but we also do so with humility, for this merciful and gracious God has given us all things in Christ, and we haven't deserved one bit. What a wonderful God we serve!

Daniel Davis is the team leader for The Gospel Project for Adults.

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FROM ONE NATION TO ALL NATIONS

Jesus's ministry on earth began with the Jews, His chosen people, and He reached out to bless Samaritans and Gentiles as well. This same pattern was reflected in His church. At first, they proclaimed the gospel to the Jews in Jerusalem and Judea, and then they expanded their ministry, as the Spirit led them, taking the gospel to Samaritans and Gentiles. As people from other nations heard about Jesus crucified and raised for the sins of the world, they humbled themselves in repentance and faith and were joined to the church, becoming one nation, one people, one kingdom unified in Jesus Christ. And people are still being added today.

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