

**Text: Philemon 12-21 (Pew Bible, pg. 1183)**

**Title: "Restoration"**

## **INTRODUCTION**

Before I get started today I want to welcome our kindergarten age boys and girls who are coming to worship today for the first time. Miss Celeste, our Preschool Minister, has prepared a special worship folder for them, and the children are being asked to draw a picture of my sermon. That should be interesting. We'll be featuring some of that artwork onscreen during the gathering time for our worship services, so that will be something the boys and girls can look forward to. Pray.

Let's open our Bibles to Philemon. This short letter in the NT portrays for us a network of relationships. There's the Apostle Paul who is in a prison in Rome for preaching the Gospel. He's writing to his friend Philemon who is a leading man in the church in Colossae, whom Paul led to Christ. Philemon had a slave by the name of Onesimus who ran away from Philemon, perhaps stealing from him in the process. Onesimus made his way to Rome where, in the providence of God, he comes into contact with Paul. Paul leads Onesimus to Christ, and knowing his story knows that he needs to go back to Philemon. However, it will be difficult for Onesimus to go back to face his master whom he has offended, and it will be difficult for Philemon to accept the man who offended him. So let's pick up reading in vv.12-21.

When things like this happen it's much easier to fix blame than it is to fix problems.

**ILLUSTRATION** – I read an article last week about a man named Carl Ericsson, a 73-year-old man from South Dakota, who was sentenced to life in prison for murdering one of his former high school classmates. It shocked everyone who knew Carl. He was a successful business man who had been married to his wife for 44 years. But he had a secret ... for over 50 years he held a grudge against Norman Johnson, the man he ultimately killed. When Carl and Norman were classmates in high school they were rivals. One day Norman, a star athlete, pulled a locker room prank on Carl, who was the sports manager. And from that day Carl was filled with resentment toward his classmate. One day, 50 years later, Carl snapped. He went to Norman's house, rang the doorbell, and when Norman answered the door Carl shot him dead.

When he was on trial for murder Carl told a judge, "I guess it was from something that happened over 50 years ago. It was apparently in my subconscious ... I just wish I could turn the calendar back."

You see, the problem for many believers today is that they are more shaped by the negative and destructive relational patterns from their growing up years than they are shaped by the love of Christ living in them, and the biblical pattern for redeeming relationships. And that's what the book of Philemon is all about.

We've talked about the "who" of redeeming relationships ... who we are in the Body of Christ. We've talked about the "why" of redeeming relationships ... why should we forgive. This morning, from Philemon, I want to talk to you about the "how" of redeeming relationships. Let's talk today about how to move forward through the pain and heartache that will ultimately come into our

relationships ... in marriage, in parenting, in church or in any other network of relationships that we may have. Here's the first principle of restoration:

### **1. FACE THE PERSON, DON'T AVOID THEM (vv.12-14).**

When someone offends us, or when we know we've offended someone, it's not easy to face them. Paul knows that is the case with Onesimus and Philemon so he says...

#### **Philemon 12 - I am sending him—who is my very heart—back to you.**

Now the relationship between Onesimus and Philemon was not right. Philemon was probably still holding on to bitterness against his slave. By the way, in many ancient households where slaves like Onesimus were present, it wasn't the harsh treatment that you might imagine from the days of slavery here in the US 200 years ago. As a household slave Onesimus would have been a very close companion to Philemon and his family. For Onesimus to run away and possibly steal from Philemon was a great insult to the family.

Paul knew they needed to face each other. It was important for Onesimus to go back and to make things right with the man he had wronged. It was important for Philemon to receive Onesimus back. They needed to be reconciled and it wouldn't be possible if they couldn't face one another in Christian love.

**ILLUSTRATION** - Many people, when they feel they have been offended give others the silent treatment. My wife tells the story of a time when she was a teenager when her dad made her do something and it made her mad. And so for several days she refused to talk to him. As a teenager that was the way she thought she could get back at him. Well this really hurt her dad and one day Nan's mom came to her to say, "You need to stop treating your dad that way."

So Philemon and Onesimus needed to face each other once again, and not avoid the issue. And Paul tells Philemon, "This is not easy for me either. I would like for Onesimus to stay here with me."

#### **Philemon 13 - I would have liked to keep him with me so that he could take your place in helping me while I am in chains for the gospel.**

#### **Philemon 14 - But I did not want to do anything without your consent, so that any favor you do will be spontaneous and not forced.**

Remember back a few verses earlier (v.9) Paul reminds us that he's an old man as he writes. I'm impressed with Paul's attitude about his own preferences at this stage in his life. Often people, when they reach old age, as Paul admits he has, they become very selfish. They make demands of their family and others that revolve around their needs being met. But you don't see that with Paul. He sees himself as an advocate for others. It would be great if Paul could keep Onesimus in Rome to meet his needs. But he knows that it would be better if Onesimus returned to Philemon in Colossae. Paul says, "I have needs, sure. But at this point in my life, it isn't about me. It's all about the Kingdom of God being furthered. I'm sending Onesimus back."

So the first principle in moving forward is to face the person, don't avoid them. Next...

## **2. FOCUS ON THE PURPOSE IN THE PAIN (v.15).**

**Philemon 15 - Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back for good—**

“Perhaps the reason...” Interesting! So there was a reason behind all this pain? So maybe this was no accident? You see, it isn't God's will for a husband or wife to betray their spouse. It isn't God's will for a teenager to go off the deep end. It isn't God's will for people to misunderstand one another. That happens because we are sinners who live in a fallen world. But God is powerful enough to take the bad stuff that comes into our lives because we live in a fallen world, and shape them according to His good and glorious purposes for each of us.

You see, God was working in everyone's life here in Philemon.

God was working out His purposes in Philemon's life, teaching him about the dimensions of Christ-like love. How would he learn this lesson without an opportunity to test his faith and love? The testing of our faith produces perseverance. Maybe you have been hurt and you wonder, “God why did you let this happen to me?” And the answer is that our faith doesn't grow without testing that comes through adversity. There's all kinds of adversity that can happen in our lives ... financial adversity, physical adversity, professional adversity, spiritual adversity and relational adversity. The purpose behind all adversity for believers is the testing and strengthening of our faith.

God was working out His purposes in Onesimus' life. We have to wonder: Did all this happen so that Onesimus would be saved? It wasn't God's will for Onesimus to steal and run away from his master, but God has worked out good from the bad. We don't know why Onesimus was never saved while he was in the household of Philemon. Philemon was a godly man. Maybe Onesimus was running from God, and it took this adversity in his life to bring him to the end of himself so he would put his trust in Christ. Paul hints at that in v.15:

**Philemon 15 - Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back for good—**

And God was working out His purposes in Paul's life. Paul apparently needed help in Rome. As it turned out, when Onesimus showed up in Rome and was saved he became a good helper and support to Paul. That's why Paul would say...

**Philemon 13 - I would have liked to keep him with me so that he could take your place in helping me while I am in chains for the gospel.**

So in this painful ordeal God was at work in everyone's life. If you and I don't understand this ... that God is working out His purposes even in the bad relational stuff that happens to us ... we will lose our faith, and Satan will gain an advantage over us. And we will give up before we see the next principle at work:

### 3. SEE THE POSSIBILITIES BEYOND THE DISAPPOINTMENTS (vv.15-16).

Don't focus on what *was*; focus on what *can be*. Don't fret over what's *lost*; thank God for what's *left*.

**ILLUSTRATION** – I know many married couples of who have gone through unimaginable pain in their marriage, but they stayed focus on the purposes of God through the adversity and, by faith, they saw the possibilities of God's strengthening. And they would tell you today that, while it wasn't God's will for whatever sin caused the problem, it was God's will to make their marriage stronger than it's ever been before.

Paul understands this:

**Philemon 15 - Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back for good—**

**Philemon 16 - no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother. He is very dear to me but even dearer to you, both as a man and as a brother in the Lord.**

So Paul says, "Philemon, think of the possibilities. Onesimus ran away for a while as a slave so you could have him back forever in a deeper relationship than you ever had before."

Remember what Paul said earlier:

**Philemon 11 - Formerly he was useless to you, but now he has become useful both to you and to me.**

Formerly (in the past or once upon a time) ... but now (in the present)

Oh what possibilities there are in the grace and power of the Lord:

**Ephesians 5:8 - For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light**

Think of the possibilities that are real because of the grace and power of God.

**Colossians 1:21-22a - Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior. But now he has reconciled you by Christ...**

And when you see the possibilities beyond the disappointments your strengthen faith will allow you turn your thoughts away from the bitterness and instead you do as Paul says in...

**Philippians 4:8 - Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things.**

Now look at v.17:

**Philemon 17 - So if you consider me a partner, welcome him as you would welcome me.**

Now we come to the action steps. “So” signals to us that there is behavior that results from these principles of restoration. And there are some imperatives or commands we are to obey. There are three action steps to be taken:

**STEP #1 - WELCOME THE OFFENDER (v.17).**

**Philemon 17 - So if you consider me a partner, welcome him as you would welcome me.**

To welcome means to receive or accept someone. It’s a gesture of friendship. It means to receive someone into the family circle. It’s the same word used to describe Jesus when ...

**Luke 15:2 - But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.”**

Welcome is the same word Paul used when he said...

**Romans 15:7 - Accept (welcome) one another, then, just as Christ accepted (welcomed) you, in order to bring praise to God.**

Welcome others because Christ has welcomed us into His family. This is what God has done for us in Christ. When we are saved we become one with Christ. And God receives us as He receives His own Son Jesus. Imagine a slave being welcomed into his master’s family. Imagine a sinner being welcomed into God’s Forever Family through Christ.

**Philemon 17 - So if you consider me a partner, welcome him as you would welcome me.**

“Welcome him as you would welcome me...” We don’t have the luxury of only embracing those who embrace us.

**STEP #2 - RELEASE THE DEBT (vv.18-19).**

**Philemon 18 - If he has done you any wrong or owes you anything, charge it to me.**

**Philemon 19 - I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand. I will pay it back—not to mention that you owe me your very self.**

Paul said, “Philemon, I know this has cost you something. Onesimus stole from you, and deprived you of his services. So whatever he owes you, put it on my account. Charge it to me.” And I have an idea that when Paul and Philemon were reunited Philemon didn’t hand him a bill. He got the message.

In redeeming relationships there’s a price to be paid. This is what God did for us in Christ. God in His holiness and perfection could not ignore our sin debt. For God to charge that debt to us means

we would perish for eternity in payment for our sin debt. God loved us and didn't want that to happen. So He charged our wrongs to the account of His holy Son. And in turn He credited our account with the righteousness of Christ. Amazing love ... how can it be? Release the debt.

**STEP #3 - LET RESTORATION PREVAIL (v.20).**

**Philemon 20 - I do wish, brother, that I may have some benefit from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in Christ.**

**Philemon 21 - Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I ask.**

The word "refresh" means to give rest or restoration. There's been anxiety in Paul's heart about this. Now he says, "Philemon, let restoration prevail.

**CONCLUSION**

**ILLUSTRATION** – One of Jesus' best known parables was the parable of the prodigal son. Remember that one? Here was a young man who offended his father and just about everyone in the family. He ran away and ruined his life, then came to his senses. He went home hoping to just be a servant in the family; that's all he felt he deserved. But to his surprise, there waiting for him was a loving, merciful father who welcomed him home with a huge party. But off in the wings was the older brother who resented what his little brother did, and refused to come to the party. In the crowd of listeners that day there were prodigals who needed to know that God loved them. And in the crowd that day were hard-hearted people who needed to rejoice in forgiveness. Are you the younger son today? The older son?