

David Carter / General Adult

Philemon: The Transforming Power of the Gospel / Philemon 15–25

Let me start with an easy riddle for you this morning:

What takes a lifetime to build, but only a second to break?

Trust.

Trust is fragile, isn't it?

A single decision, a single conversation, one failure—and suddenly a relationship that took years to form is wounded or fractured.

To my shame, I've known that personally. I've had moments where I was the one who broke trust—where I said something careless, or failed to follow through on something important, or let someone down who was counting on me.

And in those seasons, all you want is for things to go back to the way they were. But it takes time to rebuild. It takes those gut-wrenching conversations, a willingness to own your part, and the courage to take the hard steps toward reconciliation.

And here's a reality we all know:

If you live long enough, you will be on both sides of that equation—both the one who has been hurt and the one who has done the hurting.

And sometimes... the difficult thing to accept is the relationship *can't* go back to the way it was.

The hurt can be too deep. The consequences too severe.

But—and this is important—that doesn't mean God is done.

The gospel doesn't promise that every relationship will be restored exactly as before.

But it *does* promise that God can bring healing, transformation, and even reconciliation when hearts are willing.

That's what we're going to see today in our second message from Paul's letter to Philemon

Last week we saw the transforming power of the gospel.

This week we're going to see this:

**The gospel doesn't just transform lives—
it restores relationships.**

What does reconciliation look like?

Look with me at the book of Philemon this morning as we read verses 13-25.

We started looking at Paul's letter to his friend Philemon last week. We said it's like intercepting a personal email from one believer to another.

The reason Paul is writing is that while he's been in prison, he has come into contact with one of Philemon's former slaves. And I say *former* because it becomes clear in the letter that this man, Onesimus, has fled. He ran away—most likely because he had stolen from Philemon.

But while Onesimus has been with Paul, Paul does what Paul does: he shares the gospel with him.

The gospel — the good news that God sent His Son, Jesus Christ, to reconcile us to Himself.

That Jesus went to the cross bearing our sin and shame, dying in our place, rising from the dead... and that everyone who believes in Him is forgiven and made new.

And Onesimus believes. Praise God — he trusts Christ as his Saviour.

So, Paul writes to Philemon and essentially says:

"Listen... I know who Onesimus was. I know he was useless. I know he was rebellious. I know he wronged you. But that is not who he is anymore. He is a new

creation in Christ. He is forgiven. He is redeemed. And he is walking in newness of life.”

And how do we know that? Because Onesimus wants to go back. He’s returning to make things right. He is coming to seek forgiveness and reconciliation.

That’s the heart of this letter.

Paul is appealing to Philemon not to receive Onesimus as a bondservant, but as a *brother*. He is asking Philemon to do what the gospel calls all of us to do — to forgive the wrong done to him and be reconciled.

But let’s be honest.

That’s easier said than done.

Put yourself in Philemon’s shoes.

This man lived in your home. He ate at your table. You trusted him. He probably had significant responsibility.

And he steals from you... runs from you... and now Paul wants you to welcome him back?

Some of us don’t have to imagine very long.

Some of our wounds from broken trust are still fresh.

We know how hard it is to trust again.

We know what Jesus calls us to do... but inside we’re asking:

Why?

Why is reconciliation such a big deal to God?

Why does it matter so much?

I think it’s important for us to understand that forgiveness and reconciliation are not the same thing.

You can forgive someone without being reconciled to them.

Forgiveness can be one-sided.

Forgiveness is a decision I make in my own heart not to hold onto a grudge

against someone who has wronged me.

It's when I release myself from the burden of anger, bitterness, and pain.

And I can do that even if the relationship is not restored.

In fact, sometimes reconciliation isn't wise or safe.

Maybe the person has harmed you.

Maybe they've wounded you over and over again.

Maybe the relationship is not healthy for you to return to.

But you can still forgive them—you can release yourself from the prison of bitterness and anger—even if you are never reconciled.

Reconciliation is different. Reconciliation is restoration.

Reconciliation requires both people.

One person must have a repentant heart, and the other must be willing to walk toward restoration.

Reconciliation is not just forgiveness—it's the restoration of a relationship.

And here's the key:

I can forgive someone without being reconciled to them... but I can't be reconciled without forgiveness.

But wherever reconciliation *is* possible, the gospel compels us to pursue it.

And that leads to the question Paul raises in this passage:

Why does reconciliation matter so much to God?"

Well, I think what we see in Paul's letter is that reconciliation matters because it reflects the heart of Christ and the transforming work God is doing in our lives.

That's what we spent so much time on last week, isn't it?

The transforming power of the gospel to change a human heart. The power of the gospel to reshape a life from the inside out.

It's why Paul reminded Philemon of the newness of life he was experiencing in verses 4-7. The love and faith that he now has for Jesus and all the saints, how he spends his life sharing his faith in words and practical means.

Philemon was a changed man—using his wealth, his home, his resources, his family to help build the kingdom. That kind of radical generosity that kind of mission focused life is the fruit of a transformed life.

But Paul isn't reminding him of all that to stroke his ego. He is reminding him of the transforming power of the gospel because the same gospel that changes *our lives* is meant to change *our relationships*.

It moves our hearts towards a desire for reconciliation whenever possible.

Look again at Paul's words in verses 12 and 13:

“I am sending him back to you, sending my very heart. I would have loved to keep him with me, in order that he might serve me during my imprisonment for the gospel...”

Do you see what Paul is saying?

He's saying, *“I love this man. He's become like my own heart. He's been vital to my ministry. I would gladly keep him with me...”*

“...but he's saying reconciliation with you is more important.”

More important than ministry, more important than sharing the gospel.

That takes us right back to Jesus' words in the Sermon on the Mount:

Matthew 5:23-24

So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.

Do you see the priority?

Jesus is saying reconciliation is so important that it takes precedence over

worship.
Over serving.
Over sacrifice.
Why?

Because you cannot rightly serve or worship the Lord while you are clinging to a divided heart. It is inconsistent with who He is and what He has done.

Because think about what He *has* done for you and me.

Hasn't God reconciled you to Himself?

Isn't that why Jesus went to the cross — not only to forgive you, but to reconcile you, to restore you into a right relationship with God?

That's who He is.

That's what He's done.

And the evidence that His transforming work has taken root in our lives is that we now desire not to hold grudges, but to pursue reconciliation whenever possible.

This is why reconciliation matters so deeply to God —
because it reflects His heart,
it reflects His work in your life,
and it bears witness to His gospel.

But here's the second reason reconciliation matters:
It is a public testimony of the gospel's power.

It's fascinating that this is a personal letter — one brother writing to another — and yet Paul does not address the letter to Philemon alone.

Remember verses 1–2:

“...To Philemon... and Apphia our sister, and Archippus our fellow soldier, and the church that meets in your house.”

Why do you think Paul would address such a personal letter to his family and church family?

Think about this.

What a testimony it would be for Philemon's wife and son — to see their husband and father not only talk about the gospel but *live* the gospel. Not only preach forgiveness but walk in forgiveness. Not only speak about restoration, but model it.

And what a testimony it would be for the church meeting in his home. They would be able to look at each other and say, "Praise God — His gospel is alive. His grace is powerful. Look at what Christ has done in our brother's life."

Reconciliation is never merely private.

People are watching.

And when reconciliation happens in the lives of believers, it becomes a powerful witness to a watching world that the gospel is real.

This is why reconciliation matters to God:
because it reflects His heart,
it reveals His work,
and it testifies publicly to His gospel

So, then what does reconciliation look like?

If you and I are going to seek reconciliation — where do we start?

Let me give you five marks of what reconciliation looks like.

Here's the first one:

1. Reconciliation begins with repentance and a willing heart.

It takes those two things. Repentance and a willing heart.

Onesimus is clearly repentant.

We're reminded again of the change in his life when Paul says, "*Once he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful both to you and to me.*"

He probably fled because he was a useless servant — unwilling to do his job, unwilling to submit to Philemon's authority, perhaps dishonest.

But all of that has changed now.

His old habits, his old thinking, his old attitude — they've been transformed.

That's what repentance looks like.

It's a turning away from who you used to be, and taking clear steps toward a new direction.

And this is the only way reconciliation can happen. It can only happen where there is repentance.

So often people want reconciliation, but they are unwilling to repentant.

Often people who have done the hurting are unwilling to change — unwilling to own their wrongs, unwilling to do what it takes to make things right.

You cannot have reconciliation unless a person is repentant and willing to admit their faults and take steps toward change.

But repentance on one side is not enough.

The *other* person — the person who has been hurt — must have a willing heart.

That's why Paul says what he says to Philemon in verse 14:

"...I preferred to do nothing without your consent, in order that your goodness might not be by compulsion but of your own accord."

Paul is saying, *"I want to see reconciliation happen, but I don't want you pushed into it. I want it to come from your own heart."*

The offended person has to be ready and willing for reconciliation.

Otherwise, it simply won't work.

It takes time — especially when the wounds run deep.

Often, when we have wronged someone, we want things to go back to the way they were — and we want that on *our* timetable.

But it doesn't work that way.

If you have wronged someone, you need to give them space.

You need to respect that they may not be ready to reconcile yet.

And sometimes, the wrong we've done brings consequences that mean full restoration simply isn't possible.

If you steal from your workplace, you may be forgiven — but you may still lose your job.

If a spouse is unfaithful, God's heart is for reconciliation — but that process may take far longer than you would like.

If you repeatedly break someone's trust, you may be forgiven — but the relationship may not fully return to where it once was.

If someone has caused harm or abuse, forgiveness may come — but reconciliation may not be safe or wise.

These are real-life situations.

Reconciliation requires repentance, willingness, patience, and wisdom.

Here's the second mark of reconciliation

2. Reconciliation begins when we start to see God's providence in the pain.

Look at Paul's words in verse 15:

***“For this perhaps is why he was parted from you for a while,
that you might have him back forever,
no longer as a bondservant but more than a bondservant — a beloved
brother.”***

Those are strange words, aren't they?

Paul says, *“Maybe... just maybe... this is why this happened.”*

Maybe this is why Onesimus stole from you.

Maybe this is why he ran.

So that he would come back to you not as a slave, but as a brother.

What kind of statement is that?

It's the kind that trusts in the providence of God —
the conviction that God never wastes pain.

The conviction that God is always working behind the scenes, weaving even the most painful events into His greater purposes.

We saw that over and over again when we journeyed through the book of Ruth, didn't we?

What looked like tragedy, famine, loss, and emptiness...
was actually God at work.

Paul is saying to Philemon:

"Brother, maybe God has been at work in all of this.

Maybe Onesimus's running was the very thing that brought him to the gospel.

Maybe the wrong he did to you will become the doorway to something deeper and better.

Maybe God intends for you to receive him back — not as a servant — but as a beloved brother."

Have you noticed that sometimes, when you walk through pain in a relationship, the relationship can actually become stronger on the other side?

I've seen this in working relationships:

times of tension, misunderstanding, conflict... but when both people are willing to talk it through, own their part, seek forgiveness, take steps toward healing — the working relationship ends up stronger, not weaker.

And this is especially true in marriage.

Marriages that have lasted decades aren't strong because they've avoided conflict —

they're strong because they've walked through seasons of pain, disappointment, hurt, and misunderstanding...

and they've done the hard work of putting things back together again.

And on the other side of those valleys, they've discovered a relationship that is deeper, richer, and more resilient.

That's God's providence.

It's how He uses pain, hurt, and loss — not only to strengthen us — but often to deepen the relationships we thought were beyond repair.

So maybe this morning the Lord is inviting you to look at that conflict differently — not just through the pain, but through the possibility that He may actually be doing something in it.

And when we can begin to see that, it opens the door for what Paul shows us next.

Here's the third mark of reconciliation:

3. Reconciliation Restores Relationships (vv. 16–17)

Reconciliation restores relationships. True reconciliation restores relationships. And I think that's the point Paul is making in verses 16–17.

Listen again to what he says:

[Philemon 16–17](#)

ESV

“No longer as a bondservant but more than a bondservant, as 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, receive him as you would receive me.”

Do you hear what Paul is saying?

Onesimus is coming back to Philemon in a greater relationship than he had before.

Not just as a servant, but as a **beloved brother**.

Not only “in the Lord,” but also “in the flesh.”

What does that mean — “in the flesh”?

I think Paul is saying this isn’t just a spiritual reality. This is practical. Relational. Real-life.

You’re not only going to recognize him as your brother in Christ... Paul is hoping you’ll actually treat him like family, like a true friend.

That’s why he says, “*Receive him as you would receive me.*”

Paul and Philemon were more than brothers in the Lord — they were friends, partners, co-laborers.

Think about it: everyone here who belongs to Christ is my brother or sister in the Lord. But some of you I also count as friends. I don’t know why you put up with me like that, but you do — and I’m grateful for it.

And Paul is saying to Philemon,

“Brother, this man stole from you and ran. But he’s repentant now. He’s changed. So don’t just take him back into your household... take him back into your heart.

Embrace him not just as a bondservant, not just as a brother in the Lord, but as someone you truly welcome, truly love, truly walk with.”

That’s the work of the gospel.

Because of what Jesus has done for me... and what He has done for you... when someone is repentant and willing to do what it takes to make things right; we receive them back — and relationships can actually be restored.

Broken marriages.

Broken families.

Friendships that haven’t spoken in years.

When there’s a willing heart and a repentant soul, the gospel can restore relationships.

And when there is genuine reconciliation, it looks like this:

- No grudges.

- No coldness.
- No keeping score.
- No weaponizing the past.
- Just full welcome, full warmth, full embrace.

And I've lived this, personally.

When I was a young child, my parents divorced. And for most of my childhood, my dad wasn't around a whole lot. That absence created a lot of anger in me — bitterness that I carried for years.

But when I was in my early twenties, my dad and I finally began to talk. We talked about the past, the pain, the hurt. And through those conversations, the Lord did a work of restoring our relationship.

And today — praise God — I have a great relationship with my father. He's part of my life, part of my kids' lives.

That's the work of the gospel on display.

It restores relationships.

That's the power of the gospel — reconciliation and restored relationships really can happen. But that doesn't mean reconciliation is easy.

Because reconciliation isn't just a warm feeling. It's not just a hug and a handshake and everything goes back to normal. It requires more than words — it requires action... and often it requires sacrifice.

And Paul shows us that clearly here.

So, here's the fourth mark:

4. Reconciliation Comes at a Cost.

It's why Paul says what he says to Philemon in verse 18.

Philemon 18–19 ESV

If he has wronged you at all, or owes you anything, charge that to my account. I, Paul, write this with my own hand: I will repay it—to say nothing of your owing me even your own self.

We wonder if Onesimus stole from Philemon and owes it back, but Paul is willing to pay the cost of reconciliation.

Maybe it was the cost of sending people to look for him, maybe it was the cost of having to hire new servant in his place, or to have someone pick up the work he left behind.

There is a cost, it isn't simply welcome him back as though nothing happened, someone has to absorb the cost and Paul is saying, I'm willing to do it if that's what it takes.

But even if Philemon were to say don't worry about it Paul, someone would still have to pay that cost, it would just mean that Philemon would pay it himself.

We may want reconciliation but are we willing to pay the cost. Sometimes the cost is a simple apology, a recognition of our wrongs. Sometimes the cost could be some difficult, honest, transparent, gut-wrenching conversations.

Sometimes the cost is, I need counselling, or we need counselling. Sometimes it's respecting boundaries that are in place, being patient, waiting.

But maybe it's more practical, maybe you stole, and you need to pay it back; maybe you damaged property, you need to have it restored.

Reconciliation is not cheap, it's not easy, but it's worth it.

I hear Paul's word here; he's willing to pay the cost for Onesimus. And think about how necessary that is, because remember Onesimus is a slave, he's been on the run, he most likely cannot afford to pay the cost, he doesn't have the ability to pay the cost for reconciliation.

I hear that, and I can't help but once again be reminded of how Jesus paid the cost for you and me.

We all know what it feels like to have a relationship that needs to be reconciled... and no ability to pay the cost.

And nowhere is that more true than in our relationship with God.

Our sin didn't just strain our relationship with Him — it **severed** it.

We didn't just owe God an apology — we owed a debt we could never repay.

And Jesus stepped in and paid the cost we never could.

He absorbed the full weight of our sin — the guilt, the shame, the judgment — so that we could be forgiven.

He took our debt so we could receive His righteousness.

He carried the cost so we could be restored to our heavenly Father.

You and I can be reconciled to God **only** because Jesus did for us what we could never do for ourselves.

And if that's the way God has treated us, then there will be times when you and I — like Paul, like Philemon — need to be willing to absorb a cost on someone else's behalf.

That's what reconciliation often looks like.

It looks like a repentant heart and a willing heart.

It looks like eyes to see God's providence in the pain.

It looks like relationships being restored.

It looks like someone paying the cost of reconciliation.

But there's one more thing we can't miss — one last mark Paul shows us in this passage.

And it's important.

Because sometimes reconciliation doesn't happen in isolation

Sometimes it requires the help, the presence, the encouragement, and the prayers of others.

5. Sometimes reconciliation requires a community — and it always requires grace

Sometimes when the pain of broken trust is severe enough and you have two people, two parties who want reconciliation, but they don't know what to do or what steps to take.

But the good news is that you don't need to do this alone.

I think that's at least one of the reasons Paul writes this letter to not just Philemon, but to the whole church. So that Onesimus and Philemon know that as they work together towards reconciliation, they have the support of their whole church family, praying for them, walking with them.

But I also think it's why Paul says in verse 22

Philemon 22 ESV

At the same time, prepare a guest room for me, for I am hoping that through your prayers I will be graciously given to you.

Paul is saying, prepare a guest room, I'm coming up there just as soon as the Lord allows, I'm coming and I'm going to help you journey through this next season together, you start the journey and when I get there, I'll help carry the load.

The point is you're not alone; your church is with you; I'm with you and all of us here are praying for you.

It's why he ends with greetings from Epaphras, Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke.

It's to let them know you are not alone in this.

And maybe that's what you need to know here this morning, that you are not alone, if you are wanting to seek out reconciliation, if you are trying to walk the journey of reconciliation and you just aren't sure what it looks like, how to get there, brother, sister you are not alone.

You know what we have people that can journey with you, we have Stephen Ministers, we have pastors, we have a prayer team, couples ministry. You don't have to walk the path of reconciliation alone.

And my hope is that you have a growth group that you're a part of. That's what growth groups are built for. Not just to celebrate the good times in life, but to be with you and journey with you through the challenges.

Sometimes, sometimes reconciliation takes community.

"But don't miss how Paul ends the letter.

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

Because at the end of the day, that's the only way reconciliation ever happens.

Not by willpower.

Not by personality.

Not by effort.

Reconciliation is always and only a work of grace.

Without the grace of Jesus, none of us could forgive... and none of us could be forgiven."

Here's what you and I have to remember: forgiveness is not natural.

Reconciliation does not come naturally.

Nothing in us gravitates toward humility, repentance, or restoration on our own.

It is only — *only* — the work of God's grace in us and through us.

It's only because you and I have experienced the grace of Jesus in our lives... that we can then extend that same grace to others.

The grace that saved you is the grace that empowers you.

The grace that reconciled you to God is the grace that makes reconciliation with others possible.

Because grace is how reconciliation happens.

Maybe you're sitting here thinking, *"Okay... but is this actually possible? Can reconciliation like this really happen? Does the gospel really restore relationships this deeply?"*

Wouldn't it be great if we knew how this all turned out for Philemon and Onesimus?

If we could somehow peek into history and see whether this reconciliation actually happened?

Well... we may have more of a clue than you think.

Because about fifty years after this letter was written, one of the early church fathers — Ignatius — wrote a letter to the church in Ephesus.

And in that letter he mentions their bishop — their pastor — a man named **Onesimus**.

And what's remarkable is that Ignatius describes him using the same kind of "wordplay" Paul uses in Philemon... calling him "useful" to the church.

"I received your whole congregation in the person of Onesimus, your bishop in the flesh. A man whose love is beyond words, and who is—I pray you—like him who sent him... I ask you to love him as you all love me. For blessed is the One who has granted you such a bishop..."

We ought to regard the bishop as we would the Lord Himself."

Now, we can't say with absolute certainty it's the same man — but many scholars believe it likely is.

Just think about that.

A runaway slave.

A thief.

A man who was once "useless"...

transformed by the gospel...

reconciled to his brother...

and then, in time, entrusted to shepherd one of the most important churches in the early Christian world.

From runaway slave...
to reconciled brother...
to bishop of Ephesus.

Only the gospel can write a story like that.

The gospel of Jesus Christ is truly alive, powerful, and active.
It has the power to transform lives — but more than that, it has the power to restore relationships. To bring about reconciliation.

We can be reconciled to each other because Christ has reconciled us to God.

And Paul has shown us what reconciliation looks like:
it starts with repentance and a willing heart,
it has eyes to see God's providence even in the pain,
it restores relationships,
it comes at a cost,
sometimes it takes a community,
but it always — always — requires grace.

And I don't know where you're sitting this morning.
Maybe you're in a place right now where reconciliation feels impossible.
Maybe there's a relationship that is broken, strained, distant, or painful.
Maybe you're the one who has been hurt.
Maybe you're the one who has done the hurting.
Maybe you've been avoiding a hard conversation for a long time.

But my prayer is that God's Word would be a help to you today — an encouragement, and maybe even a loving challenge.

Because the same gospel that transformed your life...
is able to restore broken relationships.

Not always quickly.

Not always easily.

But only in ways that only grace can accomplish.

So, ask the Lord this week:

“Is there a step you’re calling me to take?”

“Is there someone I need to move toward?”

“Is there a cost I need to absorb?”

“Is there grace I need to receive before I can give it?”

The gospel changes everything — even the relationships we thought could never be restored.