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Resolving Conflict with Christ at the Center

Philemon

Thank you for being here this morning as we continue our series called Transformed by Truth. This past Wednesday evening Brianna and I went to Kirk and Corrie's house for a meet the pastor meeting. **We have already met the pastor but we wanted to get to know some newer people to the church.** We went around the circle and introduced ourselves and basically talked about how we got to where we are in life.

One thing I talked about briefly is how the Lord saved me and how I got into something called biblical counseling. Biblical counseling is simply using the word of God in the context of the local church to help other believers mature in Christ. It flows from the conviction that the Spirit of God uses the Word of God to do the work of God. God's Word does God's work (1 Thessalonians 2:13).

I didn't pursue a degree in biblical counseling years ago because I believed God was calling me to be a pastor and I needed more training. I pursued the degree because I knew God had used His word to change my life and I wanted to know His word better. I wanted to have a better understanding of where to go in the Bible to address specific issues in my life for the glory of God.

Here is what I have learned - The more you learn the word of God and live the word of God the more you are able to help other believers mature in Christ. As you practically apply the Scriptures to your everyday life the Lord will bring people into your life with similar problems you have had to work through. Then you are able to take what you have learned in the truth and pass it on to them.

This is how the body matures in Christ - every member doing it's part (Ephesians 4:11-16).

What Gary and I are attempting to do in this study is to show you how practical the word of God is for everyday life and the problems every Christian faces. We want to equip you to use the Bible in your life in practical ways and help others do the same. **This morning we get to talk about how God uses His word to help us resolve conflict.** The Bible has much to say about conflict - where it comes from and how the gospel reconciles sinners to God and sinners to other sinners.

Conflict resolution starts with being reconciled to God. Our biggest conflict is not with other people. Our biggest conflict is with God Himself. He is holy and we are sinful. Paul reminds the Colossians in Colossians 1:19-23 that it was God's plan to reconcile sinners who were alienated from Him back to Himself through the cross.

Colossians 1:19-23

- 19 For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell,
20 and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.
21 And you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds,
22 he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him,
23 if indeed you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed in all creation under heaven, and of which I, Paul, became a minister.

God is always the initiator in reconciliation. Reconciliation was not our idea. It was His idea. He did it while we were still sinners. Romans 5:10, "For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life." Reconciliation means to change your relationship with Someone. **God changed our relationship with Him from alienation to adoption through the cross.**

What does that mean practically? If God took the initiative to resolve conflict with us, a sign of someone who is saved is that person will seek to resolve conflict with other people, especially those within the body of Christ. Because God moved in love to reconcile us to Himself we will move in love to reconcile with those we have sinned against or who have sinned against us. That will be our Spirit empowered instinct when it comes to conflict.

God loves unity in the body of Christ. Jesus prayed for unity in John 17 the night before he went to the cross and Ephesians 4:3 tells us to be eager to preserve the unity of the Spirit in there bond of peace. The good news is that God has given us everything we need in Christ and His Word to resolve whatever conflict comes our way.

Over the past 29 years as a Christian and the last 19 years as a pastor one thing I have seen is that conflict is inevitable. **Conflict is inevitable because we still sin after we are saved.** If we didn't sin we wouldn't have conflict. 1 John 1:8 says, "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us." Because we still sin even though that is no longer our goal, some degree of conflict is inevitable.

Something else I have learned about conflict is that the way we deal with conflict is one of the main ways we grow in Christ. God uses conflict to move us to maturity in Christ. One of my goals this morning is to come at conflict resolution from a different angle than you may have heard before. **I want you to see conflict as an opportunity to mature in Christ and bring glory to God.**

The way you and I resolve inevitable conflict turns sour relationships into sweet relationships and honors the Savior.

Haven't you seen this in your own life? When you let conflict stick around with you spouse or someone else, how does that work out? Not good. Bitterness can easily take root in your heart when you let conflict linger and you don't

address it biblically. People who do not resolve conflict the right way end up with a sour relationship and that stinks. We don't want that. We want sweet relationships that are forged through resolving inevitable conflict biblically.

Jim Newheiser, "Conflict brings opportunities to glorify God, to be more like Christ, to serve others, and to bear witness to a watching world." That's a unique way to think about conflict, isn't it? **You normally don't hear the words conflict and opportunity in the same sentence.**

Ernie Baker writes something similar, "My view of conflict changed when I started realizing all of the opportunities that tensions in relationships provide for addressing issues in my own heart and in ministry to others. Before accepting this principle my default response was to avoid conflict at all costs. Then I accepted that conflict is inevitable and comes into my life through the sovereign hand of God. Therefore, it needs to be managed for His glory. This was revolutionary for my worship. God's ultimate purpose is to help us become more like His Son, our Savior! He uses the pressure to reveal to us areas where we are not like our Lord and teaches us how to be more dependent on Him. **I've often told others that seminary taught me how to understand scripture, but conflict taught me how to walk with the Lord.**"

One thing I want you to see this morning is that there are specific letters in your Bible that were written to address specific problems. **Philemon is written to help Philemon resolve conflict with another Christian.** Philemon is a postcard from a peacemaker. Paul is the peacemaker. Paul knew that a man named Onesimus had sinned against Philemon and there was conflict that needed to be resolved. That's what Philemon is about. Paul helps Philemon glorify God by resolving conflict with Onesimus who had sinned against him.

Let me explain the context of this short letter and then I want to walk you through it and show you some ways Paul helps Philemon resolve conflict. It is well documented that at this time when Paul wrote this letter there was close

to 60 million slaves in the Roman Empire. Household slaves. Some masters of these household slaves were brutal and some were believers.

Philemon was a believer with a household slave named Onesimus. Philemon was a believer and Onesimus was not a believer. What happened is that this man Onesimus stole from Philemon his master and fled from Colossae where they were living. Onesimus stole from his master and fled to Rome. He was an unbeliever running from his master and running from his master's God.

While Onesimus was in Rome he ran into the apostle Paul. **God arranged the meeting.** Onesimus couldn't have known it at the time. To bump into Paul was to bump into the gospel. Onesimus heard the gospel from Paul and the Holy Spirit convicted him of sin and converted him to Christ. Onesimus became a new creation in Christ. **A once useless man in sin became useful for man in Christ.**

Onesimus became a valuable part of Paul's ministry. But when Paul heard about what Onesimus had done to Philemon, Paul knew he needed to make it right. That was Paul's instinct. Paul was a peacemaker.

Paul loved both Philemon and Onesimus. What do you do when you love two believers and hear they have some unresolved conflict? You don't do nothing. You do something. **Paul was not okay with these two believers in Christ being right with God and not being right with each other.** Paul decides to send Onesimus back to Philemon with two letters - Colossians and Philemon. Both of these letters were written by Paul to the believers in Colossae that met in Philemon's home. Colossians is written to help Christians understand the deity of Christ and what that means for our salvation and Philemon was written to help Philemon reconcile with Onesimus. Colossians tells Christians what to do and Philemon gives a believer the opportunity to apply it.

Paul knew that Philemon would need help reconciling with Onesimus. *In that day Master's didn't pardon guilty slaves, they punished them.* In this letter Paul is shepherding Philemon's heart in order to help him pardon Onesimus and welcome him back into his home, no longer as just a bondservant, but as a sincere brother in Christ.

Are you still with me? Philemon was not written to us, but it was written for us. All Scripture is God breathed and profitable to teach us, reprove us, correct us and train us in righteousness. We need this letter because it shows us that God cares about reconciliation - Not just vertically but also horizontally. **There are principles that we learn from this letter that we can apply to inevitable conflict in order to mend broken relationships for the glory of God.**

I want us to read this letter all the way through together and then consider 4 ways Paul helps Philemon reconcile with Onesimus as a pattern for those times in our lives when we need to pursue reconciliation with another believer or help two believers who are at odds with one another mend the relationship:

Phm 1 Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother,
To Philemon our beloved fellow worker
2 and Apphia our sister and Archippus our fellow soldier, and the church in your house:
3 Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.
4 I thank my God always when I remember you in my prayers,
5 because I hear of your love and of the faith that you have toward the Lord Jesus and for all the saints,
6 and I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective for the full knowledge of every good thing that is in us for the sake of Christ.
7 For I have derived much joy and comfort from your love, my brother, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you.
8 Accordingly, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do what is required,
9 yet for love's sake I prefer to appeal to you—I, Paul, an old man and now a prisoner also for Christ Jesus—

- 10 I appeal to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I became in my imprisonment.
- 11 (Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful to you and to me.)
- 12 I am sending him back to you, sending my very heart.
- 13 I would have been glad to keep him with me, in order that he might serve me on your behalf during my imprisonment for the gospel,
- 14 but I preferred to do nothing without your consent in order that your goodness might not be by compulsion but of your own accord.
- 15 For this perhaps is why he was parted from you for a while, that you might have him back forever,
- 16 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.
- 17 So if you consider me your partner, receive him as you would receive me.
- 18 If he has wronged you at all, or owes you anything, charge that to my account.
- 19 I, Paul, write this with my own hand: I will repay it—to say nothing of your owing me even your own self.
- 20 Yes, brother, I want some benefit from you in the Lord. Refresh my heart in Christ.
- 21 Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say.
- 22 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.
- 23 Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends greetings to you,
- 24 and so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke, my fellow workers.
- 25 The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.

Okay, what is Paul doing in this short letter to Philemon? Paul knows something Philemon doesn't know. He knows Onesimus has stolen from Philemon and he also knows Onesimus has become a believer in Christ. Onesimus is now reconciled with God. Philemon didn't know what happened to Onesimus. There was no Facebook back then. So Paul tells Philemon what happened to Onesimus and appears to Philemon to forgive him and receive him back.

How does Paul go about helping these two believers resolve conflict? I see four things in this letter that Paul uses the help resolve conflict that we can use to resolve our own conflict or help other believers resolve their conflict:

Paul begins in the first 7 verses with:

1. **Prayer** - Paul starts with **prayer** focusing on the ways he sees God working in Philemon's life - Philemon 1-7

Not all of these first 7 verses are prayer. Paul starts with a greeting in the first 3 verses and then he tells Philemon he is praying for him in verse 4 and why he gives thanks for Philemon in verses 5-7.

One thing we see in this letter and in most of Paul's letters is that before Paul seeks to help believers resolve conflict he tells them he is praying for them and he tells them what he is praying for them. We see this in 1 Corinthians 1:1-9 before he addresses conflict in the church in 1 Corinthians 1:10. He wrote Philippians because two believers were not getting along and he begins that letter with prayer and pointing out evidences of grace.

What's the point? **To help believers resolve conflict Paul always started in prayer.** Paul starts by expressing gratitude to God and why he expresses gratitude to God before he addresses the problem. Some may see that and think Paul is not being sincere. He wants something and so he is just buttering people up to get what he wants. I don't think so.

Paul always wanted people to see their problems in light of the gospel. He wanted people to see their problems in light of who they were in Christ and the ways Christ was working in their life. **Why is that helpful?** Knowing God is at work is a major motivation to deal with the problems in your life. When you know

that God is for you and not against you, then what He tells you to do is a blessing and not a burden.

If you find yourself in a conflict with another believer slow down and pray for yourself and for that other person and fill your prayers with different ways you see the Lord working in their life. That's where Paul begins his letter to Philemon. **He doesn't start by telling Philemon what to do.** He starts by telling Philemon he is praying for him and he describes why he is thankful for him. Paul knows Philemon has the power to do what he is going to tell him to do because he sees evidences of God's work in his life.

Haven't you found that praying for people softens your heart toward people? I can still remember after the Lord saved me I was playing intramural basketball at the masters college. There was a guy on another team that I didn't like. I found him annoying and I had little or no affection for him. The only problem is that I knew enough from the Bible to know that not loving him was not an option. I knew that much. **We are commanded to love one another so me hating this guy on this other team wasn't an option.**

I didn't know what to do so I just started praying for my own heart and for him. He didn't know how I felt about him, but God did. I prayed for a while and then one day out of nowhere he walked up to me at the school and he asked if I wanted to fight. I guess he could read my thoughts. I'm kidding. He asked me if I wanted to go with him to a pro golf tournament that was happening in the city where we lived. He told me he heard I loved golf and asked if I wanted to go. I didn't even know he knew who I was.

God taught me the importance of starting with prayer when you are struggling to love another believer and filling your prayers with a divine perspective of the other person. **If you are currently in a conflict with another Christian start by praying for them.** Fill your time in prayer seeing them the way God sees them. You can use Philemon 4-7 to do that because what Paul saw in Philemon

is true in every believer to some degree. Use Paul's prayers as a way to pray for the believer you don't love like you should. Set the alarm on your phone and spend 5 uninterrupted minutes each day praying for them and praising God for them.

Paul is not in conflict with Philemon. He is helping Philemon resolve conflict with Onesimus. Paul starts with how he is praying for Philemon. What Paul is doing in the first 7 verses is tilling the spiritual soil of Philemon's heart. He is preparing him for a fresh opportunity to go deeper in the faith. That's what Paul has been praying for Philemon from prison in Rome. Philemon's love and faith (6) and his previous good works (7) grounded the request coming in verse 8 and following.

Paul begins helping Philemon resolve conflict by expressing appreciation for the ways that God is so clearly working in his life.

The main body of the letter begins in verse 8. Paul moves from prayer based on his appreciation to an appeal. In Philemon 8-16 Paul reintroduces Philemon to Onesimus. I want us to see Philemon 8-16 under the heading providence. What I want you to see in the middle part of Philemon is that in order to help these two believers resolve conflict, Paul helps them see what happened in light of God's providence - all of this happened for a reason:

2. Perspective - Paul helps Philemon see what happened to Onesimus from a divine *perspective* - Philemon 8-16

Notice the word accordingly in the beginning of Philemon 8. Accordingly means that Paul is connecting what he has just written to what he is about to write. **Paul is connecting his prayer for Philemon to his plea.** Here is where Paul starts to get down to business with Philemon. As an apostle Paul could have commanded Philemon to receive Onesimus back in his home, but Paul chose a different tactic. **He appeals to Philemon on the basis of love.**

Philemon 8-9

- 8 Accordingly, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do what is required,
9 yet for love's sake I prefer to appeal to you—I, Paul, an old man and now a prisoner also for Christ Jesus—

Paul was bold enough in Christ to use his apostolic authority to tell Philemon what to do. Paul did use his apostolic authority to tell people what to do in other letters. We see this in Colossians 3 where Paul commands them to treat each other in specific ways. So, why not here? Because he wanted Philemon to see this as an opportunity to take the love that he received from Christ and apply it to a new member of the body of Christ he didn't see coming.

Paul uses something to motivate Philemon to do the right thing. He hopes the respect that Philemon has for Paul will help him. Paul reminds Philemon at the end of verse 9 that he is an old man and a prisoner. Paul was a seasoned shepherd, a veteran apostle. He had been serving Christ for closer to 30 years at this point. He's old and his body bears the marks of being beaten over and over again for being faithful to the gospel.

Paul is not a nobody telling a somebody what to do. At the end of verse 9 he reminds Philemon of his age and where he is. The way Paul served Christ demanded respect. Paul was still doing the right thing even though it was hard suffering in prison as an old man for Christ. When someone you love and respect gives you biblical counsel it's important that you really listen and take heed to what they say.

Another truth we learn from Philemon is that when you have conflict it is very important to go to qualified people for help. If you are already in a hard situation you don't want to go to someone who makes it harder. How would someone make resolving conflict more difficult? People who blend man's wisdom with God's wisdom often do this. I've heard terrible counsel

given to believers who use the Bible but take it out of context or twist the meaning to tell people what they want to hear and not what they need to hear. Be very careful with who you entrust your conflict to.

This is why we seek to have reliable elders here whose character meets the qualifications of 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1 who listen to people in love and love people in the truth. We try to always start with the gospel and then apply it to whatever the problem is.

Another thing that stands out in this appeal is Paul's confidence in God's grace in this man Onesimus. God's grace is a game changer (Titus 2:11-15). Philemon 10 is the first time Paul refers to Onesimus by name. In verse 10 through 14 Paul provides Philemon with a credible report of the difference the gospel had made in his life. What is Paul doing? Paul is helping Philemon see Onesimus in a different way than he saw him before. Paul calls him my child in verse 10. He tells him how Onesimus came to know the Lord. Paul believed Onesimus's conversion was real.

Paul uses a play on words in verse 11. The name Onesimus meant useful. That's the name his momma gave him. But he wasn't living up to his name prior to his conversion. This formally useless man who stole from Philemon had found forgiveness through Christ. Now he could start living up to his name. Paul viewed Onesimus as a useful part of his ministry and passed on what he observed on to Philemon.

Again, Paul is helping Philemon see what happened as part of God's good plan. Philemon 15-16, "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, as a beloved brother—especially to me, but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord." Paul is helping Philemon see that what happened to Onesimus was all part of God's plan.

Can I ask you something - Can someone do something to you that is not part of God's plan? Is someone sinning against you outside of God's plan to make you more like Christ or is it part of the all things that God promises to work together for good in Romans 8:28? **Nothing happens to you that is not a part of God's plan - even people who sin against you.** No one wants to be sinned against, but when you are sinned against you have a prime opportunity to be like Jesus. **How you respond to someone else's sin is how you become more like Jesus Christ.**

The Moody Bible commentary says, "Paul proposed that divine providence was the reason for Onesimus's flight and then gave two sharp contrasts. First, the slave's short absence should not matter since it hardly compares with having him back eternally (that is, with eternal life). Second, in all spheres of life (**in the flesh and in the Lord, 16**), Onesimus is now not primarily a slave but a **beloved brother.**"

Ok, are you still with me? Has Paul told Philemon what to do yet? It's been 16 verses and Paul still hasn't gotten down to business. We have seen how Paul prays for Philemon and helps him see what happened to Onesimus through the lens of providence.

In verses 17-21 Paul gets down to the nitty gritty. He tells Philemon what to do in verse 17.

3. Plea - Paul helps Philemon apply the truth of the gospel to his relationship with Onesimus - Philemon 17-20

Philemon 17-20

- 17 So if you consider me your partner, receive him as you would receive me.
- 18 If he has wronged you at all, or owes you anything, charge that to my account.

- 19 I, Paul, write this with my own hand: I will repay it—to say nothing of your owing me even your own self.
- 20 Yes, brother, I want some benefit from you in the Lord. Refresh my heart in Christ.

In the middle of verse 17 we see Paul's first command for Philemon. Receive Him as you would receive me. **To receive means to welcome, to accept the presence of a person with friendliness.** It means “to receive into one’s family circle.” Onesimus was nothing but a guilty sinner. He contributed nothing to his salvation except for the sin that made it necessary. But Christ paid his debt and made him part of God's family. If God welcomed Onesimus into His heavenly family, Philemon could welcome him into his earthly family.

Paul knew Onesimus had wronged Philemon. Paul never takes his sin lightly. Paul knows that what Onesimus did was costly to Philemon. **Sin always costs somebody something. Notice in verse 18 Paul offers to pay Onesimus's debt. In verse 19 Paul picks up the pen from the man who wrote the letter and signs his name to it.** I will repay it.

How much kinder could Paul be? Do you see how much Paul cared about believers who are reconciled to God being reconciled to one another? Paul is willing to sacrifice a lot to see this happen. He missed Onesimus personally and was willing to pay the debt he owed. Paul took a lot on himself to be a peacemaker.

Then Paul reminds Philemon that he owes Paul something even greater - The end of verse 19 says, "To say nothing of your owing me even your own self." **Whatever Onesimus owes you, Philemon, doesn't compare to what you owe me.** Philemon came to saving faith in Christ through Paul's ministry, His soul was saved. Nothing is more valuable than your soul.

Paul wanted a return on the investment he had made in Philemon's life. How? **He wanted Philemon to welcome Onesimus back as a brother.** In that way,

Paul's heart would be refreshed. By forgiving Onesimus, Philemon would keep the unity in the church at Colosse and bring joy to the chained apostle. Paul knew Philemon was a man who lived to refresh other believers in Christ and this provided him with an opportunity to refresh Paul's heart in prison.

How does Paul help Philemon resolve conflict with Onesimus?

Paul begins with **prayer** thanking God for Philemon and how God was working in Philemon's life.

Paul helps Philemon see what happened to Onesimus from a divine **perspective**

Paul **pleas** with Philemon to receive him back in a completely different way because now they are both brothers in Christ

The final thing we see Paul doing to help Philemon resolve conflict with Onesimus is:

4. Pardon - The *obedience* Paul requires - Philemon 21-25

Philemon 21-25

- 21 **Confident of your obedience**, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say.
- 22 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.
- 23 Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends greetings to you,
- 24 and so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke, my fellow workers.
- 25 The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.

When it comes to resolving conflict biblically sometimes all we think that God requires is forgiveness. Reconciliation does require forgiveness but it requires more than just forgiveness. **Paul expects Philemon to go above and beyond**

forgiving Onesimus. To forgive him and to receive him back in a totally different way. He is confident that Philemon will do even more than what he says.

That's what love does. **Love goes above and beyond what's expected.** Think about it this way. When we become Christians God forgives all of our sins because of what Christ did for us at the cross. But love does more than to just forgive us. Forgiveness clears our debt but it also brings us to God. Christ died, 1 Peter 3:18, to bring us to God.

John Piper says, "If the gospel only brought us forgiveness, if the gospel only brought us justification, if the gospel only brought us propitiation, if the gospel only brought us escape from hell, and did not bring us into the enjoyment of the person of God it would not be good news. Everything Christ did, He did to bring us to God."

What Paul is asking Philemon to do in this letter is to do more for Onesimus than what is required because of what God had done for him through Christ. Paul ends the letter asking for prayer that he might be able to be freed from prison and spend some time with Philemon in Colossae.

Verse 25 is more than just a benediction for Philemon. Your is plural in verse 25. Paul is calling on Philemon to do something that went against the culture of the day. Masters didn't pardon slaves, they punished them. But Philemon and the church that met in his house had something the world didn't have. **The whole church had the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ to do what God says.** These believers were already enjoying the grace that brought them salvation, but here and in verse 3 Paul was concerned that they be encompassed with God's enabling grace for their daily walk before others.

What can we take with us moving forward from this postcard from a peacemaker? Resolving inevitable conflict biblically is one of the main ways we

grow in Christ and bring glory to God. Remember moving forward that conflict brings opportunities to glorify God, to be more like Christ, to serve others, and to bear witness to a watching world.

Many of you have heard the name Corrie Ten Boom or read her biography. She was a Dutch Christian who with her family, helped many Jews escape the Nazis during World War II. After a while they were betrayed and Corrie's entire family was arrested and imprisoned. Her father died 10 days later. Corrie and her sister Betsy were sent to a political concentration camp in the Netherlands, then to Ravensbruck concentration camp, where her sister Betsie died.

When the war was over, Corrie became famous for her book *The Hiding Place*, which gave her the opportunity to proclaim Christ to thousands of people on speaking tours. One evening in 1947, **after** she had spoken about the forgiveness of Christ at a church in Munich, she had a stunning encounter. Little did she know that night that one of the cruelest guards in the concentration camp was in the crowd and as she finished speaking she saw him walking down the aisle to speak with her.

Here is how Corrie Ten Boom describes this encounter:

The solemn faces stared back at me, not quite daring to believe. And that's when I saw him, working his way forward against the others. One moment I saw the overcoat and the brown hat; the next, a blue uniform and a cap with skull and crossbones. It came back with a rush – the huge room with its harsh overhead lights, the pathetic pile of dresses and shoes in the center of the floor, the shame of walking naked past this man.

I could see my sisters frail form ahead of me, ribs sharp beneath the parchment skin. Betsie, how thin you were! That place was Ravensbruck, and the man who was making his way forward had been a guard, one of the most cruel

guards. Now he was in front of me, hand thrust out. "A fine message! How good it is to know that, as you say, all our sins are at the bottom of the Sea!"

And I, who had spoken so glibly of forgiveness, fumbled in my pocketbook rather than take that hand. He would not remember me, of course – how could he remember one prisoner among those thousands of women! But I remembered him. **I was face-to-face with one of my captors and my blood seemed to freeze.**

"You mentioned Ravensbruck in your talk," he was saying. "I was a guard there. But since that time I have become a Christian. I know that God has forgiven me for the cruel things I did there, but I would like to hear it from your lips as well - again the hand came out - **will you forgive me?**"

And I stood there – I whose sins had again and again to be forgiven – and could not forgive. Betsy had died in that place. Could he erase her slow terrible death simply for the asking? It could've been many seconds that he stood there – hand held out – but to me it seemed hours as I wrestled with the most difficult thing I ever had to do. **For I had to do it - I knew that.**

The message that God forgives has a prior condition: that we forgive those who have injured us. "If you do not forgive men their trespasses" Jesus says "neither will your Father in heaven forgive your trespasses." And still I stood there with the coldness clothing my heart.

But forgiveness is not an emotion - I knew that too. **Forgiveness is an act of the will, and the will can function regardless of the temperature of the heart.**

"Jesus, help me!" I prayed silently. "I can lift my hand. I can do that much. You apply the feeling." And so woodenly, mechanically, I thrust out my hand into the one stretched out to me. **And as I did, an incredible thing took place.** The current started in my shoulder, raced down my arm, sprang into our joined hands.

And then this healing warmth seemed to flood my whole being, bringing tears to my eyes.

"I forgive you, brother!" I cried. "With all my heart!" For a long moment we grasped each other's hands, the former guard and the former prisoner. I had never known God's love so intensely as I did then."

Corrie Ten Boom's testimony of the power of forgiveness is a reminder to all of us that forgiveness is never easy. Forgiveness is hard. The forgiver often pays a higher price than the person who needs forgiveness. But Corrie's testimony also shows us that when we act on what we know to be true and forgive others as we have been forgiven there is sweetness on the other side. Forgiveness in Christ is a powerful thing.

Because Christ died to forgive all our sins we can forgive even when it's hard. We have the power in Christ to resolve whatever conflict comes our way. Remember this postcard from a peacemaker and read it and re-read it and follow the counsel that Paul provided Philemon and God will use His word to help you resolve conflict biblically and help others do the same. Let's pray.