

Session 1: One Part Repentance

NOTE TO LEADER

We intentionally created this study guide with more than enough material so that you can pick the questions that work best for your group. Before your meeting, watch the video, read the study guide's corresponding session, and decide which questions you'd like to discuss. For more information on using this guide in your group, click the three lines in the menu bar and select How to Use This Guide. Thank you for choosing this study and for faithfully leading your group.

Session Goals

Every session has a point—what we want to walk away from the discussion knowing, feeling, and doing.

Main Idea: God wants us to be people of reconciliation who seek to forgive and be forgiven because God, through Christ, reconciled us to himself and each other.

Head Change: To know that repentance is a necessary part of reconciliation.

Heart Change: To feel grief for our sins.

Life Change: To seek forgiveness from those we have wronged.

OPEN

What is the silliest argument you've ever had? How long did it last? Did it feel foolish at the time?

Sometimes we have a simple misunderstanding that we take too far and later realize how overblown it was. Other times we are legitimately hurt and need time to rebuild trust and restore the relationship.

Using the book of Philemon as his guide, author and pastor Dr. Bryan Loritts will present us with a framework for reconciliation. We need repentance, grace, and truth. In this session, Bryan will focus on the need for repentance.

READ

Due to the brevity of the book, we will read the entire letter of Philemon each week. Consider reading it from a different translation each time.

Philemon 1–25

*[To support your reading of Philemon, go to **Go Deeper Section 1** at the end of this study.]*

WATCH

Before viewing the session, here are a few important things to look for in Bryan Loritts's teaching. As you watch, pay attention to how he answers the following questions.

What is one word that sums up the book of Philemon?

How does Bryan define reconciliation?

What are the three components of a “reconciliation framework”?

Show session 1: *One Part Repentance* (11 minutes).

DISCUSS

Bryan shared that in the early years of their marriage, his wife, Korie, worked hard to reconcile the bank statement with their checkbook. He commented that often we put more work into reconciling our bank statements than our relationships. **Do you agree with his statement? In what areas of your life, if any, do you work harder to maintain than your relationships?**

Bryan explained that Philemon is a letter about reconciliation. He's going to show us three aspects of reconciliation on display in this book. First, let's look at this letter through the lens of repentance. Read Philemon 1–7.

In verses 4–7, Paul gives thanks for Philemon's love for God and the saints. He remarks that Christians have been *refreshed* by Philemon's hospitality, which means Philemon has encouraged both Paul and the Christians in Colossae. In your interactions with believers, you may have experienced similar hospitality. Whether it's the warm welcome from the greeter at church or an invitation to share a meal, simple acts of hospitality can refresh us. **When have you experienced hospitality that lifted a burden or encouraged your heart? How might hospitality lay the groundwork for reconciliation?**

*[Note: For a Peek at the Greek on hospitality, go to **Go Deeper Section 2** at the end of this study.]*

Read Philemon 8–11.

Bryan said we treat family members differently than we would a co-worker or a neighbor. When Paul calls Philemon his brother and Onesimus his child, Paul is highlighting the familial nature of the Christian relationship. Although Onesimus is a runaway slave whom Philemon owned, he is now a part of God's family because he is a Christian. In the same way, neighbors, coworkers, and enemies who are Christians have also been brought under the umbrella of God's family. **Have you found the way you treat family members to be different from the way you treat people outside your home? What would change if you looked at members within your church body as brothers and sisters, mothers and fathers?**

When we see other Christians as part of the family of God, we will be quicker to repent of our wrongdoings and seek their forgiveness. **In what ways does seeing Christians as family members affect how you approach repentance when you've wronged someone?**

Read Philemon 12–25.

Paul sent Onesimus back to Philemon. Onesimus may have personally handed this letter over to Philemon (see Col 4:7–9). Though this is not explained in Scripture, it must have been a difficult decision for Onesimus. He was forgiven in Christ but still had to repent to the people he hurt. As Christians, it can be tempting to repent to God but not the people we've harmed through our sin. **Why do you think it's easier to repent to God than the people we've hurt through our sin? What would it look like to seek forgiveness from those we've hurt? How could we as a group create time and space for reconciliation?**

*[Note: To learn more about Greco-Roman slavery, go to **Go Deeper Section 3** at the end of this study.]*

Bryan defined repentance as “a change in direction.” Instead of repenting, we often ignore wrong attitudes, pride, arrogance, and stubbornness and explain our sins away as “just the way I am.” Or we expect the person we've hurt to tolerate our behavior. But we need to repent from these attitudes and actions—they're sinful as well. **Are you open to seeing your sins as what they are—sin? What does it take to own up to your sin and “change direction”?**

Bryan said, “We will never do the work of reconciliation while looking at the scoreboard of the other person's offenses against us.” In other words, focusing on the sins of others will prevent us from seeing ourselves and our sins accurately. **What does it look like to feel the weight of your sin instead of “looking at the scoreboard” of others?**

In verse 12, Paul says he is sending Onesimus home to Philemon. Even though this is the right thing to do, to return is risky for Onesimus—Philemon could still choose to punish him. As Christians, we know that repentance is the right thing to do, but we can also feel uncertain about how someone will respond to our repentance. Facing the unknown can feel uncomfortable. **In what areas of your life would taking a step toward reconciliation feel like a risk? Who in your life could you ask to help you take the first step?**

Bryan defined reconciliation as the process of turning “enemies into friends.” While the goal is never to place a person in an abusive or dangerous situation, Christianity does put some unlikely people in the same room together. **Can you think of a time when your faith put you in a room with people you would not normally associate with? How has the work of the Holy Spirit turned “enemies into friends” in your own circumstances?**

Bryan said, “If we refuse to go the way of vengeance or silence, but instead attempt to reconcile, we are going the way of Jesus.” Just as Philemon was indebted to Paul, we owe our lives to Christ. And his forgiveness is greater than any offense we may hold against another person. Remembering how much Christ forgave us changes our perspective. **From whom do you need to seek forgiveness? Is there anyone you need to forgive? What could you do to seek reconciliation?**

Bryan closed this session with a story about two stubborn captains whose refusal to change directions cost the lives of many innocent people. In the same way, our refusal to repent of our sins negatively impacts the people in our lives. **What relationships in your life are affected by your sins? In what area of your life do you need to stop sinning and change direction?**

LAST WORD

Bryan explained that reconciliation requires repentance, grace, and truth. Just as Paul sent Onesimus back to Philemon so he could repent of his wrongdoing, God wants us to return to those we’ve hurt as well. While it’s easy to focus on someone’s scoreboard of offenses, if we want restored relationships, we need to look inward. When we change direction and repent of our sin, we are taking steps toward reconciliation.

As you reflect on the need for reconciliation, consider to whom you may need to repent of your wrongdoing. Consider anyone who may need you to take the first step and choose the path of reconciliation.

GO DEEPER

Go Deeper

This section has two potential functions:

1. It can supplement your small group discussion with topics your group may be interested in. We’ve highlighted where each of the following segments could fit in the Discuss section of the study guide. As the leader, it would be good to familiarize yourself with this section just in case your conversation turns to one of these topics.
2. These sections can also function as short devotionals to carry you through the week until your next group meeting. Consider using these sections to deepen your group’s study of the book of Philemon.

1. Weekly Reading Plan

Philemon is a short book, which makes it easy to read in one sitting. This reading plan will help you internalize the contents of the book by repeated exposure.

At least one day this week, set aside time to reflect on the letter to Philemon. Read the book of Philemon in your favorite translation or listen to the book in audio form. Consider both the explicit and implicit ways that repentance is present.

2. Peek at the Greek: Hospitality

Bryan noted that, in verse 17, when Paul instructs Philemon to receive Onesimus back as a brother, he is using a word (“welcome” in the CSB) that carries a sense of hospitality. The Greek word is *proslambanó*, meaning to receive into one’s home or circle of acquaintance. The practice of hospitality was highly valued in Greco-Roman culture among peers. But Paul is asking Philemon to welcome his runaway slave in the same way he would receive Paul. Paul isn’t asking Philemon to tolerate Onesimus but to welcome him into his circle as he would other Christians. While receiving Onesimus would include practical hospitality, Paul is also asking for a complete shift in perspective—to think of Onesimus in the same hospitable way that he thinks of Paul.

Paul uses the same word, *proslambanó*, when he encourages the Roman Christians to be unified despite their differences. Read Romans 15:5–7. Paul writes that they should *welcome* others with the same hospitality they received from Christ. **How can you rely on the Holy Spirit to help you welcome others as Christ has welcomed you? How does Jesus’s hospitality to you change the way you treat others who have wronged you?**

Perhaps you’ve heard the phrase, “I know God says I have to love them but that doesn’t mean I have to like them.” With this mindset, it is easy to tolerate other believers but not embrace them as brothers and sisters in Christ. But Paul in Romans 15 is saying that reconciliation is more than tolerance. We are to welcome fellow Christians. **How does understanding that Paul is seeking more than tolerance change the way you think about reconciliation? Who in your life needs you to welcome him or her as Christ has welcomed you?**

3. Roman Slavery

Paul wrote to Philemon who was a slave owner during the Greco-Roman era. Though we do not know the specific conditions or circumstances surrounding Onesimus’s enslavement, we can gain perspective from the history of Greco-Roman slavery and examples in the Bible.

The Reality of Greco-Roman Slavery:

- Slavery in Rome was not ethnically driven.
- A person of any race, ethnicity, or gender could be or become a slave.
- Sometimes individuals would enter service as slaves to pay off a debt.
- Becoming a slave could be used to improve social status, as high as Roman citizenship, when a slave was emancipated.
- Slavery was often temporary.
- Depending on the master, slaves could live in more comfortable circumstances than the freed poor man or woman.
- Regardless of how they were treated, slaves had no rights.
- Slaves were the property of their master.

- Being a slave could be a dangerous or demeaning situation—especially for women and the children of slaves.

In what ways does this information shape your understanding of Onesimus's situation?

Read Matthew 8:5–13 and Acts 16:16–21 for examples of slavery in the New Testament. **What observations can you make about how the slave owners regarded their slaves?**

Two different slaves in the same span of time and location were treated differently by their masters. One cared deeply for his servant, while the others were angry that she was healed. Based on these two examples, it seems the conditions of slaves during the Greco-Roman period were varied. **How does considering the inconsistency of the treatment of slaves impact your reading of Philemon?**

Read Philemon 15–16.

The consequences for runaway slaves were substantial. A caught slave was subject to imprisonment, beating, branding, and punishment by death. By returning to his master, Onesimus could have experienced any of these consequences. **When you consider the potential consequences Onesimus faced, how does that change how you view the weight of his repentance? In what ways can this background information on Roman slavery impact how you read and interpret Philemon?**

Session 2: One Part Grace

SESSION GOALS

Every session has specific goals—things you want your group to walk away knowing, feeling, and committing to do.

Main Idea: In response to God’s grace and forgiveness toward us, we demonstrate grace and forgiveness toward each other.

Head Change: To know God calls us to extend both mercy and grace toward those who have wronged us.

Heart Change: To feel compassion for those who have hurt us.

Life Change: To give up our right to hold on to an offense and choose instead to give grace.

OPEN

Have you ever helped children settle a dispute? How did the disagreement resolve?

Have you noticed that when kids argue, it’s difficult to facilitate an apology? And after you’ve successfully secured an “I’m sorry” from the offender, getting an “I forgive you” from the offended child is equally challenging. Helping children—who often see life in black and white—practice genuine forgiveness does not come easily. But adults struggle to forgive too. We can get just as stuck in an “it’s their fault” mindset that we fail to do the work of reconciliation. In this session, Pastor Bryan returns to the reconciliation framework found in Philemon. He will focus on the role grace plays in restoring and growing relationships.

READ

Due to the brevity of the book, we will read the entire letter of Philemon each week. Consider reading it from a different translation each time.

Philemon 1–25

*[To support your reading of Philemon, go to **Go Deeper Section 1** at the end of this study.]*

WATCH

Before viewing the session, here are a few important things to look for in Bryan Loritts’s teaching. As you watch, pay attention to how he answers the following questions.

What does Bryan say is the heartbeat of the book of Philemon?

What is critical to the process of reconciliation?

What is the difference between mercy and grace?

Note: In this session, Bryan describes a tragic incident that occurred during apartheid. The details may be difficult for some to hear. Be sure to preview the session to determine any warnings you may need to offer.

Show session 2: *One Part Grace* (10 minutes)

DISCUSS

Bryan opened this session with a story of reconciliation that took place following apartheid in South Africa. A white police officer confessed to his crimes of torture and murder of a Black woman's husband and son. What he offered to the courts and the woman was his confession. What he received from her was forgiveness and grace so astonishing it left the courtroom speechless until they started singing "Amazing Grace."

What is your response to this story of reconciliation? Have you experienced a similar demonstration of radical grace? Have you ever given this type of grace?

Last week, we looked at Philemon through the lens of repentance. This week, our focus is on grace. Read Philemon 1–16.

Bryan defined grace as giving someone something good that they don't deserve. In verse 16, Paul asked Philemon to not only receive Onesimus back without consequences but to receive him back as a brother. Like the woman who offered mercy and grace to the police officer, Paul asked Philemon to lay down his rights (mercy) and give Onesimus something he didn't deserve (grace). **What is your response to Paul's encouragement for Philemon to receive Onesimus back? Why?**

Extending mercy and grace is difficult. When we've been wronged, we wonder, "Why do I have to be the one to forgive? Where are the consequences for *their* actions?" But God calls us to give mercy and grace because he's extended them to us. **Do you feel you need an apology to extend forgiveness? Should repentance play a role? What has helped you extend grace even though it felt undeserved?**

Paul expected Philemon to receive Onesimus back and treat him as a brother. We often talk about having to earn back broken trust, and while this is appropriate, the gospel compels us to give grace without prerequisites. We can establish healthy boundaries and create opportunities for building trust while also choosing to forgive the person who hurt us. **What do you think is the difference between forgiveness and building back trust? What role does the Holy Spirit play in this type of holy reconciliation?**

Bryan explained that mercy is the taking away of something deserved, and grace is the addition of something not deserved. **Do you find it easier to practice mercy or grace? Why? What are some practical ways you could extend both mercy and grace in the conflicts you currently face?**

Bryan pointed out that many people find it easier to cut off those who hurt them than to work on strengthening the relationship. But if we want to experience flourishing relationships, we must respond with grace in conflict. **Have you been tempted to cut off a relationship? What would be the long-term cost of cutting that person off? What value would there be in working through the struggles of the relationship?**

*[Note: For more discussion on unreconcilable situations, go to **Go Deeper Section 2** at the end of this study.]*

Read Philemon 17–20.

In verse 17, Paul asks Philemon to receive Onesimus, his runaway slave, as he would Paul, an elder believer and fellow Roman citizen. How Philemon handled this situation completely impacted Onesimus's social status. The way we act toward someone who has wronged us changes his or her status as well. When we treat a person who has wronged us with dignity, we set an example for others to follow. **What difference does it make when you treat those who hurt you with love and dignity? How might your example impact those who respect or look up to you?**

Given the dynamic of master and slave, Paul knew it would be helpful for Philemon, a person of higher authority, to make the first move toward reconciliation. In our positions of authority, we can be the first to extend grace as well. **In what areas of your life do you have authority? What might it look like to take the first step toward reconciliation in those spaces?**

Philemon's actions would also impact the church meeting in his home—church members who saw Philemon forgive Onesimus would have a model to follow in their own conflicts. In the same way, when we choose to extend mercy and grace in our relationships, we are making a difference in the life of the person we forgive and anyone who is impacted by the person who is forgiven. **Can you share a time when seeing another person extend grace made a difference in your own life? How did their actions inspire you to extend grace to the people in your life?**

*[Note: For more discussion on creating space for grace, go to **Go Deeper Section 3** at the end of this study.]*

Bryan read 2 Corinthians 5:18–19, pointing out that Christ, who reconciled us to God, gave us the “ministry of reconciliation.” In other words, our reconciliation with God can be demonstrated in the way we choose reconciliation with others. When we forgive someone who has hurt us, we model the forgiveness of Christ. As Bryan pointed out, our horizontal reconciliation with others is made possible *because* of our vertical reconciliation with God. **Have you ever considered that when you practice grace and forgiveness, you demonstrate the grace and forgiveness of Christ? How might this reality change how you practice and receive grace?**

Read Philemon 21–25.

Paul writes that he is confident Philemon will do even more than what he's asked for and even requests a place to stay. Just because Paul was confident that Philemon would do as he asked doesn't mean it was easy for Philemon to carry it out. Practicing mercy is hard. Giving grace is even more so. **When has someone sought reconciliation with you, but you found it difficult to extend mercy, let alone grace? What did you do? What practices help you demonstrate grace even when it is difficult?**

When Philemon heard Paul's words, he faced a dilemma. Would he extend grace to Onesimus? We find a possible answer in church history—traditionally, the church connects the bishop Onesimus of Ephesus with the Onesimus in this letter. As Bryan mentioned, it's possible the same Onesimus that Philemon received as a brother became a prominent church leader. This story shows us that God can use our extension of grace to influence the trajectory of a person's life. When we forgive, we are making space for someone's new beginning. **To whom is God calling you to extend grace? How might your demonstration of grace impact their future?**
LAST WORD

Bryan closed his session with a story about a professor who gave grace to the man who murdered his son. Moved with compassion, he visited the man in prison regularly and even created a scholarship that helped the man learn more about the Bible.

While we would never want to experience such a tragedy, we can, like the professor, extend grace to those who have hurt us because of the grace God has shown us. As you reflect on the grace Christ gives you this week, ask yourself: Who has demonstrated grace to you recently? To whom you can give grace this week?

GO DEEPER

This section has two potential functions:

1. It can supplement your small group discussion with topics your group may be interested in. We've highlighted where each of the following segments could fit in the Discuss section of the study guide. As the leader, it would be good to familiarize yourself with this section just in case your conversation turns to one of these topics.
2. These sections can also function as short devotionals to carry you through the week until your next group meeting. Consider using these sections to deepen your group's study of the book of Philemon.

1. Weekly Reading Plan

Philemon is a short book which makes it easy to read in one sitting. This reading plan will help you internalize the contents of the book by repeated exposure.

Read the book of Philemon in a different translation. Consider reading it out loud. As you read, put yourself in the shoes of Philemon who is being asked to extend grace.

2. Reconciling Unreconcilable Scenarios

God calls us to live at peace with everyone. But sometimes peace is impossible. Bryan shared that we can't be reconciled when the other person refuses to repent of their wrongdoing. Or maybe the person is unreachable, has died, or refuses to make amends. What can we do in these situations?

Read Romans 12:14–18.

In verse 18, Paul encourages us to live in peace with everyone “as far as it depends on you.” In other words, we are to do everything within our ability to live at peace with others. Sometimes in seeking to give or receive grace, we will experience reconciliation. Other times, reconciliation is not possible. We've done what we can, but the other person will not or cannot offer the closure we desire. In these instances, we can rest knowing that we've followed Paul's instructions. **What comfort do you gain in knowing that you are responsible for your efforts to reconcile but not the outcome?**

Use the discussion questions below to work through scenarios where it is difficult to give and receive grace.

When You Need Grace

Read 1 John 1:9.

John reminds us that when we confess our sins, God forgives us completely. But what do we do when we can't get the forgiveness we seek from other people? When we need forgiveness and either the person refuses or circumstances like death or separation prevent us from gaining that forgiveness, it can be painful and unsettling for us. **How can you respond when you face a situation where you can't gain the forgiveness you desire? In what ways can you find comfort in the words of 1 John 1:9? Who can you go to for prayer and encouragement in your unreconcilable situation?**

Here are some action steps to consider:

- Live in the knowledge that regardless of how the person you've wronged responds, you are forgiven by Christ.
- If the person you have wronged refuses to speak to you or is no longer physically in your life, consider writing a letter confessing your sins and asking for their forgiveness. Though they may not see your words, the act of writing them down may help you gain closure.
- Share with a trusted friend the wrong and ask them to pray with you to have peace in the unreconcilable situation.

When You Need to Give Grace

Read Ephesians 4:29–32.

Paul encourages the Ephesians to forgive each other and reminds them that “God also forgave you in Christ.” While it may still be difficult to extend grace to a person who has hurt us, when we realize that God has forgiven us of a much greater offense, our perspective shifts. Extending grace may not come easy, but we can rely on the Holy Spirit to help us. When the person who has hurt us is no longer in our lives, we may feel that offering grace is pointless. Why dredge up old feelings? But it’s still crucial to our faith to give grace in all circumstances, not only because Christ modeled it but because forgiveness also brings healing. **What is your reaction to Paul’s instructions to forgive as God in Christ forgave you? Who can you extend grace to even if you can’t personally give it to them?**

Here are some action steps to consider:

- If the person refuses to reconcile or is unable to reconcile, write a letter of forgiveness. Again, they may never see it, but your act of choosing to forgive can provide closure.
- If the person refuses to change their behavior, removing yourself from the harm of their actions is the wisest thing you can do. You can give grace while holding your boundary in love.
- Share with a trusted friend the circumstances surrounding the situation. Pray for peace even though you are unable to reconcile.

Note: *Sometimes broken relationships can’t be mended because it is not safe for you to continue to engage with the person with whom you have conflict. In these situations, remove yourself from harm and seek help in the form of licensed counselors, medical professionals, and safety advocates.*

In all unreconcilable situations, we can trust God for his peace to sustain us. We can hold onto God’s comfort when we can’t receive the forgiveness we desire. And we can choose to forgive even if we can’t reconcile in the way we had hoped. **What action steps can you take this week to make peace in an unresolvable situation?**

3. Create Grace

In this session, Bryan taught us that we need to give and receive grace. As Christians, it can be easy to forget who we were before Christ. In Ephesians, Paul reminds us that we were dead in our trespasses before Christ intervened. In his mercy, God made us alive through Christ and by his grace, we are saved.

Read Ephesians 2:1–10.

In verses 8–9, Paul reminds us that we are saved by grace and not works. In other words, Jesus did everything to reconcile us to God. We don’t have to work for salvation;

we simply receive his gift. **What is your response to Paul's reminder that we are saved by grace and not our works? What are some practical ways you can remind yourself and others that grace is a gift?**

Take some time this week to reflect on the grace of God in a creative way. Here are some ideas:

- Journal
- Blog
- Paint or draw
- Go for a run or walk
- Work in the garden
- Play an instrument
- Write a song
- Cook or bake
- Try a new form of exercise
- Play a game
- Photograph nature
- Read a book for fun
- Make a cup of pour-over coffee

As you participate, think about the mercy and grace that's been given to you through Christ. Remember that this grace is a gift from God. Consider how you can extend grace to others in response to his generosity. If you feel comfortable, share your experience with a trusted friend.

Session 3: One Part Truth

SESSION GOALS

Every session has specific goals—things you want your group to walk away knowing, feeling, and committing to do.

Main Idea: God wants us to wrestle with the truth of our wrongdoing so we can reconcile with him and others fully.

Head Change: To know the reality and cost of our sins.

Heart Change: To feel grief over our sin and the joy of being forgiven.

Life Change: To acknowledge the truth of our sin and its consequences so we can experience reconciliation in Christ with one another.

OPEN

Did you ever play truth or dare as a kid? Did you choose the “dare”? Or did you prefer to choose “truth”?

Truth or dare is a silly game. You either tell the truth about something deeply personal or you accept a ridiculous dare. Whether we prefer to take a dare or tell the truth, we know how powerful it can be when we tell or hear the truth. In conflict, avoiding the truth may feel easier than facing our struggle, but speaking the truth in love helps restore relationships. In this session, Bryan will focus on the need for truth as we seek reconciliation.

OPEN

Due to the brevity of the book, we will read the entire letter of Philemon each week. Consider reading it from a different translation each time.

*[To support your reading of Philemon, go to **Go Deeper Section 1** at the end of this study.]*

Philemon 1–25

WATCH

Before viewing the session, here are a few important things to look for in Bryan Loritts’s teaching. As you watch, pay attention to how he answers the following questions.

Who has the job of reconciliation?

What is essential for rich relationships?

What are the three principles for stewarding truth?

Show session 3: *One Part Truth* (13 minutes)

DISCUSS

Bryan opened by alluding to post-apartheid South Africa to show how we must tell the truth about the wrongs we've committed for reconciliation to be possible. As Bryan stated, "There can be no reconciliation without truth." **Do you agree that truth is required for reconciliation? Why, or why not? What examples in your life influence your answer?**

Let's look at this letter through the lens of truth. Read Philemon 1–16.

In verses 4–7, Paul's words prepare Philemon for Paul's request to charitably receive Onesimus. In verse 9, Paul says he could use his position to command Philemon to do as he says but instead, he chooses to ask. Paul's example shows us that when we deliver truth, we should be humble and kind, treating people with dignity and respect. **How have you learned to approach others with humility when speaking the truth? How can we practice humility in difficult interactions?**

Bryan shared three principles for speaking the truth as we seek reconciliation. The first is remembering we are family. Paul uses family language throughout his letter to remind Philemon that, as Christians, Philemon and Onesimus belong to God and each other. We are also part of the family of God, which means we are connected to each other. **What can change about our attitude and actions when we view other Christians as family? How does it work practically to see another Christian as family in the middle of a conflict?**

Paul admitted he wanted to keep Onesimus with him, but he knew the right action was to send Onesimus back to Philemon and encourage them to reconcile. Paul shows us that loving correction often means speaking the truth even though it might be more comfortable to stay quiet. **Have you experienced loving correction? How did it feel to be corrected with love *and* truth?**

Before Onesimus became a Christian, he stole and ran away from Philemon. When he became a brother in Christ, he still needed to face his previous sins. We all come to Christ at different times and with varied baggage from past decisions. And while our sins are completely forgiven, we still deal with the earthly consequences of our actions. **What baggage followed you into your new walk with Christ? Who did God bring into your life to help you face the truth of your wrongdoings?**

The second principle Bryan shared is to affirm the good before you address the bad. Paul models this principle for us in verse 7 when he praises Philemon's love and care for other believers. Recalling the good in a person before confronting the bad changes our posture and can impact the response of the one being confronted. **Have you found yourself looking at a person through the lens of their mistakes? How did having a**

negative view of that person affect how you treated them? What might have been different if you looked for the good in the person first?

While Paul begins with affirming the good, he does move to truth. In verses 8–16, Paul explains Onesimus’s situation to Philemon and how he hopes Philemon will respond. Paul navigates the tension of stewarding the truth when he draws attention to what Philemon does well and then points to what Philemon needs to change. In the same way, we can treat the person in front of us with dignity when we affirm the good and lovingly speak the truth. **What does it look like to speak the truth in a God-honoring way? How have your relationships benefited when you chose to speak the truth in love?**

*[Note: To read more about speaking the truth in love, go to **Go Deeper Section 2** at the end of this study.]*

Read Philemon 17–25.

In verse 17, Paul writes, “Welcome [Onesimus] as you would welcome me.” He is asking Philemon to treat Onesimus the same way he would have treated Paul had the letter been hand-delivered by Paul. In the same way, Christians can treat those who have hurt them with the same dignity and respect as Paul expected Philemon to give Onesimus. **What does it look like when you welcome others with kindness regardless of how they treat you? What makes it difficult to maintain this perspective when you’ve been wronged by the person standing in front of you?**

*[For more discussion on repentance, grace, and truth in reconciliation, go to **Go Deeper Section 3** at the end of this study.]*

The third principle Bryan shared is not to look to win the argument but to win the relationship. Philemon faced a choice: he could win the argument by punishing Onesimus or win the relationship by reconciling with him. In our conflicts, we face the same choice. Winning the relationship doesn’t mean we avoid the truth; it means we speak the truth with the goal of maintaining or restoring the relationship. **How has facing your conflicts with the aim of winning the relationship changed the way you spoke the truth? What challenges might you face in seeking to preserve the relationship while still speaking honestly?**

Bryan closed the series sharing what it looks like when he argues with his wife. He said, “When I win, we both lose.” When our goal is to win the argument, no one wins. But when we choose to value the relationship, we can share the truth in a way that honors the person and God and leads to reconciliation. **In your conflicts with others, what can you do to show you value the relationship more than winning an argument? What’s one takeaway from this series you want to bring into your relationships?**
LAST WORD

Paul wrote this short letter to Philemon, but his instruction for reconciliation is relevant to Christians today. Like Philemon and Onesimus, we will face conflict, and we will sin

against each other. But as Bryan pointed out, Christians should be the first ones to work things out. God wants us to be people of reconciliation who seek to forgive and be forgiven. When we've been wronged, we should respond with grace and forgiveness. When we speak the truth in a way that values the relationship, we can experience authentic and fruitful reconciliation with one another.

As we wrap up our study, let's look to win the relationship in our conflicts by practicing repentance, grace, and truth. Consider which element of reconciliation (repentance, grace, truth) you need to practice or experience this week.

GO DEEPER

This section has two potential functions:

1. It can supplement your small group discussion with topics your group may be interested in. We've highlighted where each of the following segments could fit in the Discuss section of the study guide. As the leader, it would be good to familiarize yourself with this section just in case your conversation turns to one of these topics.
2. These sections can also function as short devotionals to carry you through the week until your next group meeting. Consider using these sections to deepen your group's study of the book of Philemon.

1. Weekly Reading Plan

Philemon is a short book, which makes it easy to read in one sitting. This reading plan will help you internalize the contents of the book by repeated exposure.

Write down the 25 verses of Philemon. Highlight any words that stand out to you.

Based on your reading, consider one action step you can take this week toward reconciliation: repentance, grace, or truth.

2. Stories of Truth

Paul used a public letter to urge Philemon to reconcile with Onesimus. This wasn't the only time Paul encouraged believers in conflict to work for unity. Let's read two passages that demonstrate how truth can be communicated in a way that restores a relationship. Read Philippians 4:1–3.

We can gather from the text that Euodia and Syntyche were leaders who had a disagreement significant enough that Paul heard about it. While his public approach does apply pressure, we can assume his motivation is love. In verse 3, he says they have "contended for the gospel at [Paul's] side." Their story reminds us that Christians will have conflicts with other Christians. But as Paul said in verse 2, our goal should be to live in harmony with one another. **What does it look like in your life to encourage believers to "live in harmony"?**

Paul wasn't the only one who spoke the truth in love. In the Old Testament, we read about Joseph, who was honest with his brothers about their wrongdoing. Read Genesis 50:15–21.

Joseph's brothers were afraid of how Joseph might respond to them now that their father was dead. And while he did speak the truth regarding their ill-willed actions, he also pointed to God's providence. Like Joseph, we can speak honestly about the pain someone has caused us while still honoring God. **What difference could it make if we spoke the truth in a loving way as Joseph did?**

Sometimes we speak the truth in a loving way but the person we confront does not receive it well. The possibility of more relational tension can make us cautious to speak the truth. **Have you ever attempted to point out the sin of another in a loving way, but the relationship was still fractured because you spoke the truth? If so, what happened? How do we wrestle with the reality that sometimes by speaking the truth, the relationship could suffer or change?**

In verse 21, we read that Joseph, the same man who was sold into slavery by his brothers, "spoke kindly to [his brothers]." Like Joseph, we can extend kindness while also acknowledging the truth of the wrongs committed against us. As you face conflict in your relationships, pray that God will give you the words you need to speak the truth in a way that reflects his kindness. **Who needs to experience your kindness as you speak the truth this week?**

3. A Reconciliation Framework Story

Throughout this series, Bryan has outlined a framework for reconciliation based on the letter of Philemon. The parable of the lost son, found in Luke 15, can also teach us about repentance, grace, and truth.

Read Luke 15:11–32 and consider who repented, who gave grace, and who spoke truth.

The younger son demonstrated repentance when he returned to his father. He recognized his wrong and confessed it. Like the son, we can return to our heavenly Father when we sin. We must also repent to the one we've sinned against. **In what circumstances is it easiest for you to repent of your sins? What makes it hard to repent?**

Luke 15:20–24 shows the father's radical demonstration of grace toward his son. His actions paint a beautiful picture of what Christ has done for us. We don't deserve to be sons and daughters of God, but we have been given salvation through Christ's death and resurrection. **What difference has God's grace made in your life? In what ways does understanding God's grace for you impact how you practice grace with others?**

In Luke 15:25–32, the older son spoke the truth when he pointed out how his brother carelessly spent their father’s money, but he failed to recognize the priority of the relationship in reconciliation. Like the older brother, we may be tempted to elevate the truth over the relationship, but when someone repents, our response should be like the father who ran toward his repentant son. **When have you handled speaking the truth poorly? How would you handle the situation differently now?**

The father didn’t ignore the sins of his younger son. He spoke the truth about his son’s sins, received his repentant son, and gave him extravagant grace. We, too, can be honest about the wrong while giving grace to the person who wronged us. **Who in your life has modeled this type of grace-filled truth-telling? What action steps can you take to model your life after the extravagant grace of the father?**

Reconciliation requires repentance, grace, and truth. May we repent like the younger son, extend grace like the father, and be careful that our truth does not reflect the “not fair” attitude of the older brother. This week look for ways to steward Christian reconciliation in your relationships.