

THE PEOPLE LOVING PLACE

The Cost of Reconciliation

Text: Philemon 17–20

Big Idea: Reconciliation always costs someone—but Jesus has already paid the greatest price.

Bottom Line: Because Christ absorbed our debt, we can move toward reconciliation with others.

INTRODUCTION — THE SPACE BETWEEN US

[Two people are already seated on opposite sides of the platform, pastor in between, offset behind them.]

I want you to notice something a little different tonight.

There are two people sitting on opposite sides of this platform.

And for the next few moments, I want you to imagine that these two people have a story.

Something happened between them.

- Maybe something was said.
- Maybe something was done.
- Maybe trust was broken.
- Maybe money was involved.
- Maybe one person left.
- Maybe somebody betrayed somebody.

Whatever happened, something now exists between these two people.

Distance.

And sometimes a few feet of physical distance can represent years of emotional distance. **[beat]**

Some of you know exactly what that feels like.

Because there is someone who used to be close...and now there is distance.

- Maybe it's a parent.
- A child.

- A sibling.
- A former friend.
- Someone at church.
- Someone you worked with.
- An ex-spouse.

There was a time when the relationship was different. But something happened. And now there is space between the two chairs.

[Pause.]

Before we go any further tonight, I want to ask you to do something.

I don't want you to say anything out loud.

I don't want you to write anything down yet.

I simply want you to allow the Holy Spirit to bring someone to mind.

Is there a relationship in your life where something is broken? Don't decide yet what you're supposed to do about it. Just allow the name to come.

[Let the moment breathe.]

Because tonight we're going to discover that the little letter of Philemon is actually about the space between these two chairs.

TWO BROTHERS AND A BROKEN RELATIONSHIP

Over the last several weeks, we've been walking through one of the shortest books in the Bible. Philemon. And there are three primary people in this story. **[Walk over to person 1]**

There is **Philemon**. Philemon is a Christian. Paul loves him. The church apparently meets in his home. But now he is a godly man with a runaway slave. **[Walk over to person 2]**

There is **Onesimus**. Onesimus had been connected to Philemon as an enslaved servant. But now he is on the run, he found Paul, and now serves him.

And there is **Paul**.

We don't know everything that happened.

Sometimes people tell this story as though the Bible explicitly says Onesimus stole money and ran away.

It doesn't. We need to be careful not to say more than Scripture says. But Paul's language tells us something had happened.

There was a fracture.

There may have been a financial obligation. There was some kind of debt between these two men. And somewhere along the way, Onesimus encounters Paul.

And through Paul's ministry, Onesimus encounters Jesus. And Jesus changes him.

That's what we saw last week. Paul says Onesimus is no longer merely a slave. **He's a brother!** The gospel has given him a new identity. But there's still a problem.

A changed person doesn't automatically mean a repaired relationship.

Onesimus has met Jesus.

But Philemon is still sitting over here.

And Onesimus is still sitting over here.

There's still history between the chairs. There's still something unresolved. And that's where we pick up Paul's letter.

SCRIPTURE READING — PHILEMON 17–20

Listen to the Word of the Lord:

“So if you consider me a partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. If he has done you any wrong or owes you anything, charge it to me. I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand. I will pay it back—not to mention that you owe me your very self. I do wish, brother, that I may have some benefit from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in Christ.” — Philemon 17–20

There is one sentence in this passage I want you to hear tonight. Paul looks at the broken relationship between these two men and says:

“Charge it to me.”

THE DEBT BETWEEN THE CHAIRS

I want us to notice what Paul does **not** do. Paul doesn't pretend nothing happened.

He doesn't say: “Philemon, you're a Christian now. Get over it.”

He doesn't say: “Onesimus loves Jesus now, so the past doesn't matter.”

No. Paul says: “If he has done you any wrong or owes you anything...” Paul acknowledges the possibility of a real debt.

Something happened. Something may actually be owed. And that's important because sometimes Christians misunderstand grace.

- We think forgiveness means pretending something didn't hurt.
- We think reconciliation means acting as though nothing happened.
- We think being spiritual means saying: “It's fine.” When it wasn't fine.

The gospel doesn't require us to pretend the wound didn't happen.

- If someone betrayed you, it happened.
- If someone abandoned you, it happened.
- If someone lied about you, it happened.
- If someone humiliated you, it happened.
- If someone took something from you, it happened.

And if **you** were the person who caused the wound, the gospel doesn't give you permission to minimize what you did either. You cannot demand from someone to just “move on and get over it!”

Grace does not rewrite history. Grace changes what happens next. And that's exactly what Paul is trying to do.

He's asking: What happens next?

There is Philemon. There is Onesimus. There is a debt between them. How does the gospel enter the space between these two chairs?

SOMEONE STEPS INTO THE MIDDLE

This is where Paul does something remarkable. He steps into the gap.

He tells Philemon: ***“Welcome him as you would welcome me.”***

Think about that. Paul doesn't merely say: “Don't punish him.”

He says: **Receive him.**

And then Paul goes even further: “If he has done you any wrong or owes you anything...”

And then come the words: **“Charge it to me.” [Pause.]**

Put his debt...**on my account.**

[Pull out a folded stack of bills. Begin counting them out, one at a time, into Philemon's hand as you speak. Philemon receives reluctantly, then sets them down on the floor and leaves them]

Philemon, whatever he owes you — count it. [bill] Whatever was taken — count it. [bill] Whatever it costs to make this right — **[bill]** — put it here. I'm not asking you to absorb it. *I am.*

And Paul wants Philemon to know he means it. So he says: *“I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand.”*

In other words: Philemon, this isn't empty rhetoric. I'm signing my name to this. And then: **“I will pay it back.”**

[Pause.]

Do you see what's happening? Philemon has been wronged. Onesimus has a debt. And Paul steps between them and says: **Put the debt on me.**

Church...Does that sound familiar?

THE GOSPEL — GOD STEPPED INTO THE DISTANCE

This little story between Philemon and Onesimus is beginning to look remarkably gospel-shaped. Because the Bible tells us that there was once a much greater separation.

Not between Philemon and Onesimus. Between **us and God**. Sin created distance. And Scripture doesn't minimize that either.

- We sinned against God.
- We rebelled.
- We rejected Him.
- We chose ourselves.
- There was real guilt.
- A real debt.
- A real separation.

And God did not stand on the other side of that distance and shout: **“Fix yourselves and then come back!”** God came toward us. **[Nudge Philemon closer to Onesimus]**

Listen to 2 Corinthians 5: “God... reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation...”

And then Paul says: “God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them.” How?

Because somebody stepped into the middle. Jesus Christ. And on the cross, something happened that was infinitely greater than what Paul offered to do for Onesimus.

Paul says: “**Charge it to me.**” And at the cross, that is exactly what Jesus did for us.

- My sin?
 ◆ **Charge it to me.**
- My guilt?
 ◆ **Charge it to me.**
- My rebellion?
 ◆ **Charge it to me.**
- My shame?
 ◆ **Charge it to me.**
- The judgment I deserved?
 ◆ **Charge it to me.**

[Reach into pocket again — empty. Turn it inside out.]

Paul had a wad of cash and a limit. Jesus had neither. Jesus stepped into the space created by our sin and absorbed the debt Himself. Every last penny!

Paul said, 'I will pay it back.' Jesus said, 'It is paid in full.'

Paul tells Philemon: “I will pay it back.” // But Jesus doesn't say: “**I will pay.**”

From the cross Jesus declares: “**It is paid in full.**” Paid. Finished. The debt has been absorbed. The way home has been opened.

God has reconciled us to Himself through Jesus Christ. That is the gospel.

[Pause.]

And this is why reconciliation is not merely some psychological technique for healthier relationships.

This isn't: “Here are five ways to resolve conflict.” Reconciliation is written into the very heart of Christianity. **We worship a God who reconciles.** We follow a Savior who crossed the distance. We have been brought home because somebody else absorbed our debt.

THE RECONCILED BECOME RECONCILERS

But here's where the gospel gets uncomfortable.

Because 2 Corinthians doesn't stop with: "God reconciled us to himself through Christ."

It continues: "...and gave us the ministry of reconciliation."

In other words: **The reconciled become reconcilers.** [Nudge Onesimus closer to Philemon]

Those who have experienced the reconciling grace of Jesus begin carrying that grace into their relationships.

And this is where I have to come back to these two chairs. **[Step back and look toward both people.]**

Because I cannot spend my entire life celebrating the fact that Jesus crossed the distance to reconcile me to God...while never allowing Him to ask me whether there is some distance **I need to cross.**

That's what makes Philemon so challenging. Paul isn't writing a theological textbook about reconciliation.

He's looking at two Christians who have a broken relationship and saying: **The gospel has to mean something here.**

- Not just in church.
- Not just during worship.
- Not just when we pray.
- Here.
- Between you two.
- The gospel has to enter **this space.**

And that's exactly what we've been asking throughout this series: *What does The People Loving Place look like?*

It doesn't simply look like a church where people smile at each other. Or greet each other. Or serve coffee. Or say, "Good morning." The People Loving Place is a community where the gospel enters the space between broken people.

The People Loving Place pursues reconciliation because Christ first reconciled us to God.

WHICH CHAIR ARE YOU SITTING IN?

But here's something else we need to understand.

Not everyone in this room is sitting in the same chair.

For some of you...**you are Philemon.**

- Someone wronged you.
- You didn't create the fracture.
- You didn't choose what happened.
- And maybe you've been carrying it for a long time.
- Your next faithful step might be forgiveness.
- It might be releasing your right to vengeance.
- It might be deciding that you're no longer going to rehearse the offense every day.
- It might be allowing God to soften something that has become hard inside of you.

For others of us...**we're Onesimus.**

- **We're the ones who did the wrong.**
- And sometimes we want to use grace to escape responsibility.
- "Well, God forgave me."
- Yes.
- Praise God.
- But being forgiven by Jesus doesn't mean we don't need to own what we've done to people.
- Maybe your next faithful step is:
- Go back. Own it. Confess it.
- Apologize without defending yourself.

Without: "I'm sorry, but..." Without explaining why they actually contributed to what you did. Maybe restitution needs to be made. Maybe trust has to be rebuilt.

Maybe you've been praying for God to heal a relationship while God has been waiting for you to say: "**I was wrong.**"

And then there's another person in this story.

Paul.

- Some of you may realize tonight that God has placed you near a broken relationship.
- And maybe you've been talking about the fracture instead of helping heal it.
- Paul doesn't gossip about Onesimus to Philemon.
- He doesn't gossip about Philemon to Onesimus.
- **He becomes a peacemaker.**

Jesus said: "Blessed are the peacemakers..." The People Loving Place needs people like Paul.

People who don't exploit relational fractures.

People who don't take pleasure in choosing sides.

People who carry grace into the gap.

A NECESSARY WORD ABOUT RECONCILIATION

Before I ask you to respond tonight, I need to say something very clearly.

Because the word **reconciliation** can be misunderstood.

Romans 12:18 says: "If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone."

Notice those words. **"If it is possible."**

And: **"As far as it depends on you."** Scripture recognizes that reconciliation is not always completely within your control. Forgiveness and reconciliation are connected, but they are not identical.

I can forgive someone before God even if that person refuses to repent. But reconciliation involves two people. Trust may need to be rebuilt. And sometimes boundaries are necessary. So I want to be absolutely clear tonight.

If the person who came to your mind has abused you, threatened you, manipulated you, or would put you or your family in danger: **I am not telling you tonight that you need to contact that person.**

Your faithful next step may be forgiving them before God while maintaining a necessary boundary.

- It may mean seeking counseling.
- It may mean talking with a pastor.
- It may mean using a safe mediator.
- It may mean leaving the relationship in God's hands.

Jesus does not require you to call something safe that is dangerous.

[Pause.]

But there is another side to this.

We also need to be careful that we don't call something **unsafe** simply because it is uncomfortable.

- Some relationships require boundaries.
- **Other relationships require courage.**
- Sometimes what we're calling a boundary is actually bitterness.
- Sometimes we've spent years waiting for the other person to make the first move.
- Sometimes we know exactly what obedience requires...we just don't want to do it.

And I'm not going to tell you tonight which situation you're in.

That's between you and the Holy Spirit. But I am going to ask you to let Him search you.

RESPONSE — WHOSE NAME BELONGS ON YOUR CARD?

[The two people stand and quietly leave the platform. Leave both chairs empty.]

I want you to look at these chairs again. They're empty now. Because these aren't really Philemon's and Onesimus's chairs. They're ours.

[Pause.]

At the beginning tonight, I asked you to allow the Holy Spirit to bring someone to mind. Maybe He did immediately. Maybe you've been resisting the name for the entire sermon.

Maybe you're realizing that the name you expected to put in the other chair isn't actually the person God is dealing with.

Maybe it's you. So I don't want you to ask: **“What do they need to do?”**

I want us to ask something much harder. **Jesus, what part of this belongs to me?**

[Keep silence for one minute. Maybe repeat the prayer.]

Tonight there are 3×5 cards here at the altar. And I'm going to invite you to do something simple. Come forward. Take one. And write **one name**.

Nobody is collecting these cards. Nobody is reading them. This is between you and Jesus. And underneath that name, I want you to write this question: **Jesus, what is my faithful next step?**

- Maybe He says: **Forgive.**
- Maybe: **Confess.**

- Maybe: **Apologize.**
- Maybe: **Make restitution.**
- Maybe: **Ask for mediation.**
- Maybe: **Stop talking about them and start praying for them.**
- Maybe: **Make the call.**
- Maybe: **Leave the door open.**

And for some of you, perhaps: **Maintain the boundary and entrust them to Me.** I'm not asking you to promise that this relationship will be fixed tomorrow.

I'm not asking you to contact someone who is dangerous. I'm not even asking you to know exactly what happens next.

I'm asking: **Are you willing to put this relationship into the hands of the Jesus who reconciled you to God?**

Are you willing to say: **Jesus, whatever obedience looks like for me, I'm willing.**

Because reconciliation always costs someone. Pride may have to die. An apology may have to be offered. A debt may have to be released. Restitution may have to be made. A difficult conversation may have to happen. But before you ever take your step toward another person...remember:

Jesus already took the greatest step toward you.

Before you ever absorb a cost...**Jesus absorbed your debt.**

Before you ever cross the distance...**Jesus crossed the distance for you.**

The reconciled become reconcilers.

[Open altar].

Come. Take a card. Write the name. And ask Him:

"Jesus, what is my faithful next step?"

COMMISSION

Church, this is what The People Loving Place looks like.

We refresh weary people.

We choose love over power.

We see people through the lens of redemption.

And because Christ first reconciled us to God...**we pursue reconciliation.**

So take the card with you.

Put it somewhere you'll see it this week.

Pray for the name written on it.

Listen to the Holy Spirit.

And when He shows you your faithful next step...take it.

Church, let's be The People Loving Place.

BENEDICTION

Church, look at those empty chairs one more time. The debt has been paid. Whether we ever pick it up is between us and Jesus.

So go —as people who were once sitting in the distance, now sent into the gaps others are still sitting in.

May the grace of Jesus Christ, **who** crossed the distance and paid what we could not, the love of God the Father, **who** never once stood on the other side and waited for us to fix ourselves, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, **who** makes us carriers of a reconciliation we didn't earn,

go with us —

into every empty chair,

every unfinished conversation,

every name still written on a card in our pocket —

until The People Loving Place

is not just where we gather,

but who we become.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen.