

Fixing Broken Bonds

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 01 September 2024

Preacher: Johan DeJong

[0 : 00] Lord, we thank you for your word. We thank you that it is the way that you speak to us before! all other ways. We thank you that it is trustworthy and true. We pray now that as we come to try to! understand it, you would open our hearts, soften our hearts. We pray that in Jesus' name. Amen.

Amen. If you were reading the BBC a few months ago, then you might have picked up the fact that there was a bit of a controversy at the Garrick Club. Now, most of us don't really care about the Garrick Club because it's somewhere in London that we never go. But it was in the news and there was a big kerfuffle. And that reminded me of something else that happened at the Garrick Club, which I read about, a long, long time ago. I think it must have been in the 18th or 19th centuries. And it was on a New Year's Eve at the Garrick Club. So you can imagine everybody in their tuxes. New Year's Eve ball at the Garrick Club. And there's a British dramatist called Frederick Lonsdale. And he's talking to one of his fellow members. And he's called Seymour Hicks. Now, Frederick Lonsdale has had a big argument and a falling out with one of his fellow members. And Seymour says to him, you really need to go and be reconciled to that guy. It's very uncharitable and unfriendly to be arguing with somebody on New Year's Eve. I don't really know what the significance of New Year's Eve is to Seymour Hicks. But he thinks it's uncharitable to be arguing with somebody on New

Year's Eve. He says, it's just, look, there he is. Go across to him now and wish him a happy new year. So Frederick Lonsdale goes over to the member that he's been disagreeing with. And he says, I wish you a very happy new year. But only one.

It's a story and it's a joke, isn't it? But actually, those kinds of disagreements and the kind of the undercurrent of, I don't really want to forgive you, but I guess I'll have to forgive you, that's going on there is everywhere in life, isn't it?

It's everywhere. It's in our families. It's in our offices. It's in the church. Because people can hurt us.

[2 : 11] Maybe they do it on purpose. Maybe they don't. Maybe it's for a good reason. Maybe it's not. But we're still hurt.

And we struggle to forgive them, don't we? And we go outside these doors and we know that the world thinks forgiveness is a good thing. It is a good thing, isn't it? But, you know, for the life of me, I am not hearing any good reasons out there for me to forgive somebody if I am angry with them. And even if someone could give me a good reason, like, well, it's better for you.

You know, you'll feel more at peace. Then they still can't give me the power to do it. Where is that coming from? Real forgiveness. Not the kind that wishes somebody one more Happy New Year. The devil uses that kind of hurt to divide and damage, doesn't he? That's what he does. So how can damaged relationships, broken bonds, be fixed?

Well, that is what Paul is talking about here. He's writing from prison. And he's not just talking about that. He's actually got a deeper message about the Lord Jesus that he wants us to grab hold of at the same time.

[3 : 24] How do we know this is about relationships and broken relationships? Well, if you were following through the letter, then you will have noticed that 13 times these kind of close relationship words come up.

Fellowship, brother, fellow worker. And if you looked at the Greek, it would be even more striking. But what is the story here? Got three main characters.

Got Onesimus, who is a servant in Philemon's house. He's probably paid for and cared for by Philemon, but he's not free.

And he's run away. And he's probably stolen from Philemon in order to be able to run away. And somehow he's ended up with Paul.

And he's not in a great position because he's a thief. And as a runaway slave, he's under the death penalty under Roman law. But then something happens when he's with Paul.

[4 : 22] He comes to faith. He meets the Lord Jesus. And we don't know why he's run away. But that's where he is now. Imagine how he feels.

Probably scared. And now I know the Lord Jesus, but what should I do now that I'm following the Lord Jesus? About the fact that I've run away and stolen things? What's right to do?

That's Onesimus. And then there's Philemon. Philemon is an elder in the church, probably in Philippi. And he's wealthy. And he's married. He's got his own family and his own house.

And he's in the situation where, well, his reputation's at stake. Because his slaves run away. I'll tell you what everybody around him was probably thinking. Oh, can't keep his slaves under control.

Probably can't keep his household under control at all. So I think Philemon's probably feeling, if he loved Philemon, first of all hurt. But if he didn't love Philemon, at the very least, slightly worried about his reputation and vulnerable as a result.

[5 : 24] And then there's Paul. Paul, who's under house arrest in Rome. And as he says himself, he's now an old man. And he's a friend of Philemon's.

And what he senses here is danger and opportunity. Something needs to be done. And something should be done. So that's the story.

That's where we are. And he writes a letter, Paul, in that context. And he writes it not only, as you see, to Philemon, but he writes it to the whole church. Do you see that? Verse 2. And to the church that meets in your home.

So everything that Paul says now, whether it's a promise or a request, he says in public. In front of witnesses. And he can be held accountable for it.

So what does Paul say? There's a broken relationship. There are some hurt people. What does he do and say? Well, the first thing that we learn from what he does and says is that we can help fix broken bonds by caring like the Lord Jesus cares.

[6 : 35] Because that's what Paul does here. You've probably seen it on telly or maybe you've even done it yourselves. Someone finds a house like that.

And they think, I'm going to do it up. Now, if you're going to take on a project like that, a restoration project, if you're going to fix something up to be what it once was and that's your starting point, that takes a lot of love, doesn't it?

You've got to really want to do it. And Paul shows that kind of love. Because he has to tread carefully with Philemon, who's hurt. Just like you'd have to deal carefully with what remains of that building.

And he does so with love. Verses 1 to 9, we can see that he actually appeals to Philemon on the basis of his relationship with Philemon. Philemon, I love you.

Please listen. Look at what he does. To Philemon, our dear friend and fellow worker. Verse 1. Verse 3.

[7 : 36] Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Verse 4. I thank my God as I remember you in my prayers because I hear about your love for all his holy people.

Ding, ding. That includes Onesimus now. And your faith in the Lord Jesus. I pray that your partnership with us in the faith may be effective in deepening your understanding of every good thing we share for the sake of Christ.

Your love has given me great joy and encouragement because you, brother, have refreshed the hearts of the Lord's people. You see what he does? He praises Philemon, doesn't he?

He says, you are doing really well. Look, I see the pattern of your life and behaviour. And it is such an encouragement. He encourages Philemon, doesn't he?

Commends him. And he's not silly when he does it. Because it's that pattern that he's going to point to when he makes his request of Philemon as well. But this is genuine.

[8 : 33] He says, Philemon, thank you for your partnership with me in what is not an easy job all of these years. I am so thankful for you. Thank you. And if you see what's going on, verse 20.

Philemon's good at refreshing the hearts of the saints. And Paul says, I do wish, brother, that I may have some benefit from you in the Lord. Refresh my heart in Christ. So what's he saying?

He's basically saying, keep doing what you're doing, brother, but just do it in this situation too. And we'll see how that comes out shortly. So having rehearsed all of that, having said, Philemon, this is great.

I love you. What does he then say? Verses 8 and 9. Therefore, although in Christ I could be bold and order you to do what you ought to do, yet I prefer to appeal to you on the basis of love.

His relationship is so good with Philemon. And he's so tender towards Philemon that he says, I could, as an apostle appointed by the Lord Jesus, tell you what to do now.

[9 : 45] But I'm not going to do that. Instead, because we love one another, I'm going to ask you. Would it have been wrong for Paul to order him to do something? No. It wouldn't.

But it is better, isn't it, what Paul has chosen to do. So we can start to fix broken bonds by caring for someone like Jesus does.

If you can think in terms of your own life and your own situation, do you know somebody who has been wronged like Philemon has been wronged?

Or perhaps you are the somebody who has been wronged like Philemon has been wronged. Can you show that person this kind of love?

Can you be a Paul for that Philemon? Can you care for them like the Lord Jesus? Or if you are the Philemon, the person who has been hurt, are you willing to receive this kind of love from other Christian brothers or sisters?

[10 : 52] Are you willing to be cared for and appealed to by a Paul? Can you build that person up in the good pattern that they have been building themselves so that they can apply that refreshing even now when they've been wronged?

That would be powerful, wouldn't it? By this shall all men know that you are my disciples, if you love one another as I have loved you.

Those are the words of Jesus that underpin this. So we can begin to fix broken bonds by caring like the Lord Jesus. But secondly, we can fix broken bonds by interceding like the Lord Jesus.

Verses 9 to 21. Now, back when I, I hope I don't say this too often, but back when I was working in the city, I used to have to have a security pass to get into the building.

Most of the big offices in London have one of these. And there was one afternoon where I'd gone out to grab a bite of lunch with some friends, and I came back to the gate and I realised no pass.

[12 : 04] I think I must have left it inside the building. I'm not sure how I got out, because you have to scan yourself out at the same time as well. I still don't know how. So one of my colleagues, very kindly and probably at risk to himself, scanned me through with his security pass.

So I got back in the building, even though I didn't have my pass. No pass, no access rights. And that is really a picture of what this interceding is.

You see, somebody else uses their rights, deploys their rights on your behalf, so that you can have access. Somebody else advocates for you, because you cannot do it yourself.

And that's what Paul does here. Paul pleads for Onesimus in a way that he can't plead for himself. What does he plead? Let's look at verse 10. I appeal to you for my son, Onesimus, who became my son while I was in chains.

Well, this is something, because Onesimus is not a blood relation to Paul. And yet Paul says, he has become my son. And Paul says, because I've adopted Onesimus, because I have given him that status, please accept him back.

[13 : 28] Remind you of anyone? Let's keep reading verse 11. And formerly, Onesimus was useless to you, but now he has become useful both to you and to me.

Onesimus has changed. What's happened? He was useless, now he's useful. Well, there's two things going on. One is a play on Onesimus' name, because Onesimus means useful.

But there's something deeper going on here. Paul isn't just bantering with words. Something has changed. Let's keep reading.

Verses 12 and 13. I am sending him, who is my very heart, back to you. I would have liked to keep him with me, so that he could take your place in helping me, while I am in chains for the gospel.

Onesimus has become dear to Paul. Somehow, Onesimus is now Paul's very heart. He loves him. And Paul says to Onesimus, please take Onesimus back for two reasons.

[14 : 39] One, because he's dear to me. I love him. And secondly, because I'm willing to give him up. And the subtext there is, and if you don't take him back, then you're kind of spurning my sacrifice, Philemon.

So he pleads his love for Onesimus, doesn't he? But there's more. Verse 14 and 15. I did not want to do anything without your consent, so that any favour you do would not seem forced, but would be voluntary.

Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back forever. Paul detects that there's something going on behind what's going on on the surface.

God has his plan in all of this. Paul says, in this dangerous situation, God is turning evil into good. God's plan was for Onesimus to be separated from Philemon for a little while.

Why? So that they would be back together, but now with a better, stronger relationship than they had before. And Paul sees that. And he pleads it to Philemon.

[15:57] But more remarkable still, verse 16. Philemon is to take him back no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother. He is very dear to me, but even dearer to you, both as a fellow man and as a brother in the Lord.

But Paul says, you take him back because he's not a slave anymore. He's free. How does that work?

Because legally, of course, he's still a slave. In fact, now he's a slave under the death penalty. So, to human appearances, he's never been less free.

Has he? But Paul, as he so often is, is thinking about the inward condition, not the outward. And this is what the Lord does, what the Bible does.

It looks first at the condition of the heart. And only then at the outward condition. And slavery, of course, is first in the heart. As human beings, we are followers.

[17:02] We follow things. And those things we follow, they have control over us. And Paul is saying, Onesimus has been freed. Inwardly, he is a free man.

And therefore, he deserves a reception as a brother. Because you, Philemon, are also a free man. Freed by the same person. And now he's family. And here it is, verse 17.

He sums it up. So, if you consider me a partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. Treat Onesimus, the runaway slave who stole from you and has damaged your reputation, the way that you would treat me, Paul, your old friend and partner in the gospel.

We fix broken bonds by interceding like Jesus. Verse 18. If he has done you any wrong or owes you anything, charge it to me.

Paul doesn't ignore the fact that hurt has been done. Wrong has been done. He says, put it on my account. I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand.

[18:13] It's as if he's got his pen out and he's signed the blank check. Paul restores and fixes that relationship by interceding like the Lord Jesus.

Again, we ask the question, who is there in your life who has made mistakes and who needs speaking up for in this way?

We fix broken bonds by interceding like Jesus. So far, we've really been speaking about helping other people and maybe a bit about being hurt ourselves.

Is there more? Is there more here for us? There is. It's the final thing we learn. Is that the real way to fix broken bonds here below is for each of our bonds with the Father to be fixed by putting our faith in the Lord Jesus.

Ultimately, we fix broken bonds by being reconciled to God through faith in Jesus. See, this story is deeper than Onesimus and Philemon and Paul because the characters themselves present a picture.

[19:30] Philemon is the wronged father. Onesimus is rebel humanity under sentence of death. And Paul is the Lord Jesus, sacrificing and interceding.

See, God's plan is being worked out behind the scenes in this world, deeper than we can see sometimes. What is the crux? The crux is this.

It's that ultimately all things are mended when Jesus pays our debt. When he buys our freedom on the cross. So that we can return home to the master that we belong to.

But now coming back not as a slave. As family. See, it's us who are separated from God for a little while. So that we might be restored to him forever.

Free. As family. Just like with Onesimus, God has turned our running away. And our consequences.

[20:35] And he's turned it round. So that it is better for us. And that it is more glorious for him. So on a human level, even if we are caring like the Lord Jesus and interceding like the Lord Jesus for other people.

It only helps so much, doesn't it? Ultimately, our horizontal relationships are only repaired when our vertical relationship is.

What is that like? When Jesus gets to work, it's a little bit like using one of these. Someone want to tell me what that is?

Blow torch. It's like a welding torch. Thank you, Elroy. A loan of this. I was debating whether to light it. I thought, no. None of you know my DIY skills well enough to be confident about that.

But this is what it's like. When Jesus' love gets to work on people, it's the only outside force that is strong enough to soften metal.

[21 : 41] And then, weld it back together again. Only that force, the love of Jesus, is enough to soften our hearts. So that we can be welded back together again.

First with the Father. Then with one another. And of course, for that, you have to have Jesus in your life.

Do you? Do you have somebody to plead for you? Somebody to intercede for you? Somebody to love you like the Lord Jesus loves us? See, to be reconciled, we need Jesus.

And we need to go back to the Father on the strength of what the Lord Jesus has done for us. Like Onesimus did with Paul's backing. And if you're a believer already and you've been reconciled and you've been welded, that is great.

I can guarantee you that at some point in your life, you will find yourself in the position of Philemon, Onesimus or Paul. And what are you going to rely on then? Is it a good moral framework?

[22 : 53] Or is it the power of the Lord Jesus' love working in your heart? To soften us and weld us back together. There's a hint here of how that works in verse 3 and verse 25.

There's a common word and that word is grace. It is by grace that God sends us the Lord Jesus. It is by grace that he puts his love in our hearts.

It's by grace that he allows us to be worked on and to work on others with that love of the Lord Jesus. So that broken bonds can be fixed. Only by God's grace is that possible.

I'll tell you one more story to finish. I don't know how many of you are avid poetry fans, but there was a poetess perhaps called Elizabeth Barrett.

Any of you heard of her? Nick has. There you go. Well done, you can enlighten us afterwards, Nick. She suffered in childhood an accident which caused her to be basically semi-invalidated.

[24 : 03] She couldn't do very much, couldn't move very much. And that happened before she got married in 1846. And when she was young, she had what today might be called helicopter parents.

We wouldn't let her do anything, wouldn't let her go anywhere, take any risks. And when she eventually did get married, she had to do it in secret because her parents would never have let her get married or approved of the person she was marrying.

And after the wedding, they sailed away because that was the only way they could be free to live their lives. That was in Italy. But even though her parents then disowned her, she kept writing letters to her parents.

Never gave up. Never gave up on the relationship. Almost every week. Do you know how many replies she got? None.

Not a single one. And after ten years, she received a large box in the post. And inside, what did she find? All her letters. Not one of them opened.

[25 : 09] And those letters are some of the most beautiful letters ever written in the English language. And if her parents had read just a few of them, that relationship might have been restored, mightn't it?

The Lord Jesus has written us a letter. We need to take it to heart if we want to be restored.

Really want to be restored to him. And to those around us. Let's pray. Father, each of us has been hurt.

And has hurt others. And Lord, each of us needs to receive mercy and give mercy.

We thank you, Lord Jesus. But the letter of Philemon shows us that you offer us mercy. And you offer us the power of your love.

[26 : 15] So that we can change. And we can even help others be changed. We pray, Lord, that you would fix broken bonds in our lives. And we pray most of all, Lord, that if our bond with you has not been restored, that you would do that.

That we would return to you. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. We're going to sing in response to what we've heard.

Thank you.