

Costly Grace. Dependent Prayer.

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: 16 June 2024

Preacher: James Ross

[0 : 0 0] sends you greetings, and so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke, my fellow workers. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Amen. So last week we said that love is the only force capable of turning an enemy into a friend, and we thought about the power of God's love in the gospel. That through Jesus' death on the cross there is the forgiveness for sinners. There is a demonstration of costly grace that reconciles sinners to God.

We thought about this as a personal letter dealing with some wonderfully significant themes, and here we have a very personal issue going on of this runaway slave Onesimus, who's now a follower of Jesus, and the question of how will Philemon receive him? Will restoration take place? And I think the value of this letter, this personal letter, because most of Paul's letters are to churches, is that it can become a test case for us. It allows us to stop and to think, how can the Christian faith promote and practice reconciliation, not as an abstract idea, but between two actual people? And how can the Christian faith then promote and lead us to practice reconciliation in our stories?

I want us to return to spend some time thinking about reconciliation because we understand, don't we, that we all find ourselves here, and perhaps we find ourselves here often. Sometimes it's because we are the party that is in the wrong, we cause the offense and the breach. Sometimes we are the party who has been wronged, and sometimes we may find ourselves as the mediator between two parties.

We need forgiveness, and we need reconciliation in families, societies, in nations. It's a terrible thing, isn't it? When you look at a nation or nations, we look at a community where forgiveness and reconciliation is absent, because all you are left with a cycle of hate and hurt and revenge and tit-for-tat violence. Our world needs people of grace, communities of grace, who are ready to follow the way of Jesus, to abandon revenge and to choose forgiveness. This isn't a cheap grace. You know, the Bible never calls us to insist on forgiveness and throw justice out the window. This isn't grace that doesn't seek confession on the part of the wrongdoer. This isn't limited grace either, where we kind of welcome someone back, but we always keep them at arm's length and they're always on probation. Well, let me just see if you merit my acceptance back. This isn't no grace, where there is absolutely zero prospect of forgiveness, where all that we offer to someone is strict justice. The Bible calls us to costly grace, forgiveness. And that can only be practiced by those who know personally the cost to God of our forgiveness. And as we appreciate that, that we are then willing to pay the cost in order to forgive and to reconcile with others. So that's what we're going to think about today. We're going to think about the appeal for reconciliation, the challenge of reconciliation, and then think about the resources for reconciliation within our text. First of all, and again, this is kind of by way of summary, the appeal for reconciliation. So this letter comes to a man called Philemon, though it's read by the whole church. We're told in verse 2, he is a Christian leader. There's a house church that meets in his home.

[4 : 1 2] He has been a real gift to Paul the apostle, helping him in his ministry in various ways. And so Paul writes this letter, an appeal for a man by the name of Onesimus. That's there in verse 2, I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, who became my son while I was in chains. Onesimus had been Philemon's slave, had treated him badly, and has then run away, has come to Paul. Now he's a son in the faith. Verse 16, he's now a brother in the Lord. And we ask ourselves, what has changed? And what has changed is that God in his kindness had led Onesimus to Paul to hear the gospel, to hear there is good news of forgiveness. And Onesimus has repented, he's turned away from sin, he's turned to God, he's believed the good news of the gospel. So there's been this really important change of heart.

Again, to think about the story that Jesus told of the prodigal son. Remember that son as he comes back to his father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. Onesimus' turn comes as he realizes his wrongdoing, as he confesses and as he believes. And so Onesimus is the one who is being appealed for.

What is the basis of the appeal? What is Paul wanting Philemon to do? Verse 17, if you consider me a partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. So notice what Philemon is being asked. Paul says, you can't say no to forgiveness. Philemon, you are not to put Onesimus on a lengthy probation, keep him at arm's length. You are to practice costly grace that forgives, that reconciles, that welcomes. Verse 16, love him as a fellow man and as a brother in the Lord. Practice a love that covers a multitude of sins. Think from Philemon's perspective for a moment. This needs a really high level of trust, high level of trust in Paul, because this is Paul delivering his testimony of what he has seen in Onesimus. Onesimus really has changed. He is coming back to you definitely. He's coming back to you as a child of God. He has confessed his sin. He has found forgiveness, so you can welcome him as a brother. He knows his past, so he needs to learn to trust.

It also needs a very high level of spiritual strength for Philemon to follow his strong Savior, to follow Jesus who gave his life refusing to seek revenge in order to reconcile sinners to God.

[7 : 10] There is beauty, there is power in forgiveness and reconciliation. And the church that Philemon belongs to, this church in the city of Colossae, has the opportunity to shine God's light, to say that by God's grace and in God's family, there's a different set of values established. It was really typical in Roman society that if you faced dishonor, you would seek revenge.

If you know anything of Rome, you know they were fierce in battle, they were fierce in their pursuit of justice, they were not known for mercy. But then Jesus came and his teaching and his love brought a revolution. Because Jesus sought the greatest good for others, praying, Father, forgive them.

praying for his enemies, praying for his enemies, even while he was being killed. Jesus practiced what he preached when he preached, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you. As he bore our sins on the cross, that by faith in him we might be forgiven. And so Paul issues this appeal to Philemon. Philemon, you know the gospel, you know the gospel of reconciliation. Let that gospel burn into your heart. So that you and your church, that we and our church be places of forgiveness and the healing of relationships. So that's the appeal for reconciliation that we see. Now we need to just think for a moment about the challenge for reconciliation. So I already mentioned it in Roman society, and especially if you had power. If somebody wronged you, that brought shame. And the acceptable way in Roman society to deal with that kind of shame, to restore your honor, was to seek swift revenge. That's actually why so many runaway slaves were crucified.

[9 : 23] Justice, no mercy, let's get revenge. There was one other alternative to this in Roman society. There was a group of people, the Roman Stoics, the Stoicism. How do you respond to circumstances when they go against you? How do you react when people offend you? Well, you dismiss them from your thoughts and from your hearts, as if they are a no thing. So there's two very different paths that would be open in Roman society. Typically one, the way of anger and revenge. Now think about the society that we live. Do we see examples of people responding with anger and revenge? Think about what happens often on social media. Think about even musicians and artists using their art to seek revenge, break up albums, becoming a new thing. Think about cancel culture, how quick people are to judge and condemn. We absolutely do still see that path so often when people wrong it. So anger is one path. The second path open in Roman society was that of avoidance was that of avoidance. Switch off your heart. Act like the person is a nobody and a no thing. What does that look like today? Do we still see that? You know about the phenomenon of ghosting. Just stop communicating with a person if they let you down. Avoid their company. Avoid their church.

What is Paul seeking as he writes to Philemon? It's not anger, is it? And it's not avoidance. It's a third way. It's something far more demanding, something far more radical, more beautiful, but more difficult.

But I hope we'll see that it's something that we all need and it's good for a church and it's good for a society. Listen again to God's ancient wisdom. Leviticus 19, we heard it earlier, verses 17 and 18. Do not hate a fellow Israelite in your heart. Rebuke your neighbor frankly so you will not share in their guilt. Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against anyone among your people, but love your neighbor as yourself. I am the Lord. The challenge of reconciliation for us there are three things that

are forbidden here. We are forbidden from seeking revenge. We are forbidden from hating in our heart.

And we are forbidden from bearing a grudge. Carrie Fisher, who most famously played Princess Leia in Star Wars, put it like this, resentment, bearing a grudge, is like drinking poison and then waiting for the other person to die.

[12 : 29] That's something that we are forbidden from. No revenge, not hating in our heart, not bearing a grudge. That's challenging enough, but there's two things positively we must do.

Notice in our text, we must rebuke. That says that when we have been wronged, we have a responsibility in love, seeking the good of the other to seek change, to seek a change of heart, to pursue another. So we must rebuke, but we must also love. Love your neighbor as yourself.

Do we see the challenge? Do we see the challenge? We are to care about justice, and at the same time, we are to care about and to show love.

That's the challenge. But do we see this is where Christianity has something unique and wonderful to offer the world, because what's at the center of our faith? It's the cross of Christ.

When we think about the cross of Christ, we recognize here is the reality that God takes justice seriously. So seriously, He sent His Son to die for sin. The only way that we could be forgiven and reconciled is for the sinless Son of God is for sinless Son of God to die in our place, He takes justice seriously. But there at the cross, we see He takes a demonstration of love so seriously that He gladly, willingly sent His Son, and His Son gladly, willingly paid the debt of justice and extended forgiveness and extended forgiveness by His grace. So it's the cross, it's redemption that makes true forgiveness and reconciliation possible. But it's a challenge. So we need to think, thirdly, about the resources for reconciliation. How is it that we will, how is it that we can pursue love over avoidance or anger or even arrogance that would say, oh, look at the mess they made, look at what they've done? How can we become bridge builders? How can we bridge the gap between us and others when things go wrong? What resources does Christianity uniquely provide to help us? This past week, there was an old bridge down in the Port of Leith that was reopened, the Victoria Swing Bridge.

[15 : 24] It had its steelwork repaired, its wooden decking replaced, so that it's now able to bear weight safely again. There's 300 tons of iron girders in that bridge that gives it the strength to hold freight and cargo. As we think about becoming bridge builders, what are the girders, what are the supports that can bear the weight of reconciliation? How can we put things right with others without being crushed?

We talked about one last week, and it's fundamental. We need the support of the love of God in the gospel to always know, remember, and live out of the reality that if you're a Christian, that you are someone who has dishonored and rebelled against God, and that by rights what we deserve is justice and condemnation. But in the gospel, Jesus, the Son of God, takes our place and takes our sin and pays the price and full, and we are fully and freely forgiven. So we always need the love of God as we seek to pursue reconciliation. Two more pillars to think about here. One is costly grace, two is dependent prayer. And I want us to think in this letter of Paul as the mediator. You know, Paul has Philemon as an old dear friend. They've worked together for the sake of Jesus and the gospel. And now here is Onesimus. He's become his new friend, another partner in the gospel. He cares for the bull. Let's think first of all about costly grace. It's there at the top and bottom of the letter. Verse 3, grace and peace to you from God our

Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. And then his last words to Philemon, the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. In some ways that's a standard greeting, grace and peace, then you go into the body of the letter. But it's more than that. What is Paul's desire for Philemon? What is Paul's desire for the church that meets in Philemon's house? It's that they understand and appreciate and experience again the grace of God the grace of God in which they stand. That they would live in this reality of enjoying peace with God because of the work of his Son, their Lord Jesus. What is grace? Grace is the undeserved love and favor and kindness of God given to people who do nothing to merit that.

Now why does a felt experience, not just here's the truth of grace and it's over there and I know it in my head, but a felt experience of it in our hearts, how does that help us when we think about reconciliation? Well one way I think it helps us is it should always create a sense of humility within us.

As we recognize that ever since Adam and Eve, everyone, everyone has been a spiritual runaway. Everyone has run from God's word. Everyone has run from God's love. Everyone has refused to trust him.

[18 : 49] Everyone since Adam and Eve has been guilty of spiritual robbery, stealing God's glory for ourselves, being really happy to take all God's good gifts and kindnesses in our lives, but ignoring him as our creator, robbing him of worship as we give our hearts, our loyalty, our love to other things and other people rather than to the one true God. And each of us are spiritual rebels. Whenever we hear God's law, reminds us that we don't live up to how God wants us to live. That perfection, that holiness that God demands, including our failure to love others well. We are all Onesimus. And if we understand I am so bad and I am so sinful that nothing less than the son of God dying in my place would save me and forgive me, then we understand that I need to receive this grace always. And that should humble us always.

So grace creates humility. But secondly, and this is also important, grace within us creates humble strength in the believer. Because we understand the gospel as truth that has transformed us, that Jesus did die for me, though I am a runaway, though I am a robber, though I am a rebel, that Jesus did take all my unrighteousness, he gave me his perfect righteousness, and that he has bridged the gap between sinners and a holy God. Now as I believe that that is true for me, that should change what happens when someone wrongs me.

I go to the gospel, I go to the cross, and I remember that God has forgiven me, and I have done far, far worse to God than anyone can ever do to me. And as we remember that, that will help us to refuse the way of bitterness and revenge. When someone lets us down and we're tempted to get angry, or we're tempted to give up on them and avoid them, we look at God's command to practice forgiveness.

And we understand that God gives us grace so that we can practice forgiveness. Because now we know my identity is tied up with how God treats me, not how that other person treats me.

So I don't need to be twisted by bitterness and the need for revenge. When we are hurt, we lean into God's grace and love. And we remember that we want to bring honor to God always, which includes being willing to forgive others. And so grace is a vital resource as we seek to pursue reconciliation. But so too is prayer. You have this wonderful picture of Paul the apostle as a man of prayer, this middle man. And picture him in your mind's eye. You know, he's got one hand in Philemon's hand as a dear brother, one hand in Onesimus's. And he wants to draw them both closer to the Lord Jesus and to bring them closer to one another as he does so. And we have this beautiful picture of what a mediator does, standing in the gap, lovingly speaking the truth of the gospel, in love pursuing reconciliation, which gives glory to Jesus and shows the power of the gospel to a watching world.

[22 : 43] Think about his prayer in verses 4 to 7. It's a wonderful prayer. What is Paul thankful for in Philemon's life and witness? Look at verse 5. I always thank my God because I hear about your love for all these holy people and your faith in the Lord Jesus. Because he has faith in Jesus, his love and his loyalty are towards Jesus. Philemon is known for showing love and loyalty to the people of Jesus. Verse 7. Your love has given me great joy and encouragement because you, brother, have refreshed the hearts of the Lord's people. He's a generous character, showing generosity and grace in his relationships with other Christians. His life is full of grace because God has shown him grace.

What is Paul's prayer request? Verse 6. 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. Paul prays that as Philemon restores Onesimus, he'll be acting as a partner in the faith. He'll be putting his faith into action. And he prays that as he does so, Philemon will be led into a deeper experience of those shared spiritual blessings that they have in Christ, and maybe one blessing in particular, a fresh appreciation of God's love for him in Christ. That as he practices forgiveness and reconciliation, he'll do so remembering that God in Christ forgave him and reconciled himself to him. So Paul prays to God and speaks in verse 7 directly to Philemon, saying to him, listen, you've been showing love and loyalty to God's people. Keep doing that by forgiving this one, by forgiving Onesimus, choosing reconciliation, not revenge. Philemon, keep on refreshing others.

Keep on bringing joy within the church by welcoming Onesimus into your home and into your church. And so we've got this wonderful pattern. And if we're called to be a mediator, a pattern for prayer, that love and grace would be extended, that refreshing and restoring would be taking place,

that the pattern of Christ might be followed and lived out by his people for his glory.

[25 : 21] In conclusion, as we think about reconciliation, we recognize a beautiful work of costly grace. I want to share a story that I came across this week. It's the story of a man called Joe Avila.

He lives in the States. As he tells his story, he says, near the house where he lived, there are two signs. One sign on the wall says, don't drink and drive. Another sign just below it says, in honor of Amy Wall.

And as Joe tells his story, he tells the story of one night driving while drunk, knocking down and killing Amy Wall back in 1992 and being charged with second-degree murder. Now, while he was awaiting trial, he was checked into a Salvation Army six-month sobriety program.

And after those six months, he came out sober, free of the need to drink. But he also came out having heard the gospel of coming to know for himself the wonder of God's forgiveness.

Of God being reconciled to him in Christ. He spent seven and a half years in prison, taking every opportunity he could to tell fellow prisoners about the love of God in Jesus.

[26 : 53] But then when he was released, he tells this wonderful story of being welcomed by a local church, New Hope Community Church. Their pastor had heard that he was coming out and for four months preparing the people of God to welcome this brother in Christ well.

And so he was restored to a community and grace was on display. But greater still, as Joe tells his story, he speaks of the miracle of grace of the day when Amy's dad, Rick Wall, came to meet him and spent hours with him.

And by the end of the day when he was on display. And by the end of that time, offering him forgiveness and reconciliation. And could turn to the man who had killed his daughter and say to him as a brother in Christ, I love you.

That's a miracle of grace. It's a beautiful, hard, costly work. And it's the heart of the gospel.

It's the heart of God. In that story of the prodigal son, we encounter a loving father. Who was willing to extend undeserved grace to a shameful son.

[28 : 18] To a son who had wronged him and who had dishonored and rejected him. The father said, I love you. You're back home. Able to feast over him.

And the deeper that you and I go into God's costly grace. As we see and appreciate Jesus' arms outstretched on the cross.

And to understand that he is there for us. So that our father might welcome us into his arms and to say to us, I love you. Then we have grace to draw from.

To pursue the good of others. To pray for help. To pursue justice and love and grace. To refuse to live in bitterness.

To pay the price of forgiving someone. That together we might be a community of hope and of healing.

[29 : 25] Let's pray together. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.