



BELLVILLE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

A Congregation of the Uniting Presbyterian Church in Southern Africa

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Philemon

~ Brent Russell ~

- For any one of you involved in **employing anyone** in any shape and form will know that labour law is a complex and often frustrating part of being an employer
- You have all sort of legal **obligations to the employee**
- And the employee has **obligations to the employer**
- It really is often a **messy and exasperating** affair when things do not go well in the relationship
- Often people will get the **CCMA** involved
- a group who mediate in labour law difficulties

- We see and hear about these issues all the time in the media
- **Today's sermon finds itself in the context of a labour dispute**
- **One of the difficulties we as ministers face is that we are called to be jack of all trades and masters of none or so it goes**
- Some of the roles we fulfil we are well trained for – others not at all:
 - **Preachers** on Sundays
 - **Theologians** to the academically minded
 - **Philosophers** to the questioning
 - **Bodyguards** to the bullied
 - **Counsellors** to the perplexed
 - **Doctors** to the sick
 - **Accountants** to those in financial difficulty
 - **Administrators** in the office

- **And well in the letter to Philemon Paul is also having to play the role of labour mediator**
- **And sometimes we as ministers and Christians have to play this role too...**

Read Philemon

- This book is so **short** it only has verses and no chapters
- and as we have read it you must have felt a little to yourselves that this is at one level so **bland and ordinary**
- Really this is a **short note scribbled from one friend to another** – barely a page worth of writing
- **And Paul tries to mediate between a slave owner Philemon and the slave Onesimus – both who are "true sons in the faith"**
- **Hardly profound at all – no doctrine, no philosophical or theological insights**
- And yet this has now **found it's way into the scriptures** and it is now the Word of God
- **A gentle reminder from God that he often uses the ordinary things in life to achieve eternal value**
- Bizarre about that **1940** years after it was written we should read together Paul's letter to Philemon as our scripture reading here at BPC
- **And so never underestimate whatever you do in the name of God**
- He uses our ordinary actions to achieve eternal and lasting things
- **Labour law in Rome was very much master biased**
- If your slave was a problem you had him **killed**
- Simple and easy to do
- **I am sure some of you who employ staff wish things where that simple**
- **And so Onesimus has run away form his master Philemon**
- **And understanding that he may be killed if caught he has possible stolen some valuables if we read vs. 18**
- Hey if I am going to die if caught I may as well do this properly
- **Go out with a bang**
- **But things have changed for Onesimus**
- At some point this young slave has **met Paul** who is imprisoned for his faith
- **Perhaps Onesimus himself has been put in jail for some petty crime or another and they shared a cell or something like that**
- **But wonder of wonders this man has heard and understood the gospel from Paul and has now become one of the brethren**
- **And so Paul is sending him back to his owner to face the music**
- **I can get very irritable and short tempered at times**
- Perhaps mostly when people in my employ do things or don't do things as I have asked them to be done
- Please clean that and it is left dirty, or please don't touch that and it is damaged
- **Grrrrrr**

- **Reading between the lines I suspect that by the tone he uses, Paul knows that Philemon – fully within his rights is going to be mad as hell with Onesimus**
- **He is going to be irritated and frustrated, fully within his rights to prosecute Onesimus to the fullest extent of the law**
- **And this may even mean death**
- **But Paul is playing a different tune**
- And as I think he is being, as only Paul can be, as manipulative as anything for the sake of Onesimus
- And there are a number of reasons Paul does this

UNDERSTANDS THAT UNDER CHRIST ALL ARE EQUAL

- Paul wrote in Galatians **3:28** "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus."
- Outside the church you may command a **million rand a year salary** or you may hold down a menial job earning a **couple rand an hour**
- You are all **one in Christ**
- Outside the church you may **manage a team of hundreds** who make an organization a success or you may be on the bottom rung of the ladder under everyone else
- You are all **one in Christ**
- You may wear the most beautiful **designer clothes** or you may wear **second hand clothes** bought at the hospice store
- You are all **one in Christ**
- You may live in a **marvellous home** and be the product of **immaculate breeding**
- **Or you may live in a rented room and not know who your parents are**
- And yet in the eyes of Almighty God through his Son Jesus you all have equal value
- **There is no distinction when you come to Jesus**
- He does not care what car you drive, what cell-phone you have where you live or what you do
- He cares about YOU
- He LOVES you
- In the eyes of Christ you are simply beloved – the one whom he loves
- We all are equal in the eyes of Jesus
- And no more clearly so than when we share **communion**
- **A place where all are sinful and in need of a saviour**

- **Paul is trying to get Philemon to understand that the ways of the world are not the ways of God**
- **The world makes distinction between rich and poor, between powerful and weak**
- **Philemon is a man of means**, money enough to have a slave
- **Onesimus a lowly servant slave**
- But the moment they came to faith they became one in Christ
- **When Onesimus came to know Jesus he was given the title of a Son of God**
- **When Philemon came to know Jesus he was given the title of a Son of God**
- And Paul is appealing to Philemon to understand this truth that all are one in Jesus
- **We no longer act and think like the world**
- You try to dress like a slob and **test drive a car** they will chase you out of the showroom
- Yet if you dressed smartly and went the next day they would give a drive
- Watch how others talk to people around them
- **We make distinctions**
- **We treat people differently depending on their accent, skin colour or style of dress**
- **And yet in the eyes of Christ we are one**

UNDERSTANDS THAT CHRIST MEDIATED BETWEEN GOD AND HIM

- **But why would Paul be trying to do this?**
- Why get involved with a conflict that really has **little or nothing to do with Him?**
- Clearly as teacher of God's word he has to teach Philemon the truth
- But this issue is really none of His business is it, this is a matter between a slave and His master
- **Paul founds his action on the profound central truth of our faith**
- **I believe that Paul understands this truth**
- I believe too that we all **know this truth**
- **But I am not sure that this truth has always affected our lives the way it should**
- **Rod has been teaching us that our belief creates our behaviour**
- Believe – behave
- Believe - behave
- Believe – behave

- **Paul has a powerful deep seated, life changing belief that affects his behaviour and makes him step in to this situation**
- **Paul believes that Jesus reconciled him to God**
- **And so his behaviour is to help reconcile others**
- If you have not seen the **movie 'Luther'** it really is a great insight into His life
- At one point he stands under trial by the church and he says these words
- They are accusing him of teaching things against the churches tradition
- And Luther when asked to recant says: "**Here I stand, I can do no other, God help me**"
- **His belief in the Gospel of Grace is so powerful that he can not behave otherwise**
- **And it is supposed to be that way with us**
- **Our beliefs should have such a powerful effect in our lives as to drive us onwards**
- **And we cannot do any other**
- The truth that Jesus has reconciled you to God must be such a powerful force that you attempt to reconcile others,
- **And so your words should be "I must reconcile them, I can do no other, God help me"**
- **The model of Philemon, Onesimus and Paul is a helpful model for us of God, us and Christ**
- Simple to understand: let me explain

Philemon - God

- It is right and acceptable for **Philemon** to be **seeking restitution and justice**
- As slave owner he **has that right by law**
- As **God** the father is right in **seeking justice for the sin** we have committed against him

Onesimus - Us

- Onesimus has **damaged the trust** between him and Philemon and he has **taken what is not his** – material goods
- As we too have **damaged our relationship** with God and have **taken things** that were not ours to take, innocence and beauty

Paul - Christ

- **And in the middle stands Paul trying to make peace and reconciling these two parties**
- Like a labour mediator he is trying to make peace

- **And between us and the wrath of a holy God stands Christ who answers on our behalf**
- **reconciling us to God and making peace**

- Paul believes that Jesus reconciled Him to God
- And His belief affects his actions
- Belief – behaviour
- Belief – behaviour
- Christ reconciled me to God so I will try to reconcile others too

If you believe in Jesus as reconciler between you and God, the only appropriate behaviour is to be a reconciler yourself

- ***2 Cor 5:18-19*** *All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation.*
- Our belief then defines our behaviour as the scriptures state: We have been given the ministry of reconciliation and so let me tie this together for you with three hands-on applications:

Reconcile others to God

- Our first Job in the ministry of reconciliation is to **reconcile people to God**
- **As Paul pleads on behalf of Onesimus**
- So we need to be **praying for our lost loved ones**
- **Praying and pleading for the grace of God to be real in their lives**
- The scripture tells us that ***"The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective"*** James 5:16
- God answers our prayers and so we need to pray earnestly for those who do not believe
- **We need to pray that they would be reconciled to God**
- That they would **make peace** with Him
- **And respond to His offer of grace**

Reconcile others to each other

- We seek not only reconciliation to God
- **Paul has clearly helped both men come to faith in God**
- He now wants them to be **reconciled to each other**

- I am sure that you know friends or **family members that are feuding** and have alienated themselves from each other
- Perhaps there are **members of this body whom you know to be at odds**

- **As uncomfortable as it is you need to help bring them to reconciliation**
- **Your belief in Jesus reconciliation of you to God compels you to it**

- **In south Africa's history Desmond Tutu understood this call and so was born the TRC**
- As he tried, in God's power to **reconcile the victim and perpetrator**
- **Worldwide this is considered as one of the most gracious acts of reconciliation we have ever known**
- **Driven by the belief of a man who understood that he had been reconciled to God**
- **Reconciliation pays a price**
 - **Paul offers to pay back** anything owed by Onesimus
 - For **Tutu** and the TRC the cost of the stress was a **cancer**
 - **For Christ the cost was the cross**
- **There is a cost to pay when we reconcile others**
- **But then nothing worth doing is easy**
- **But we do it because Christ has modelled that kind of sacrifice for us**

Reconcile yourself with others

- **Finally and probably the toughest one of all**
- **We must reconcile ourselves to others**

- **The truth is for each of us we have people who we are out of sorts with**
- Sometimes we have **no reason** for feeling this way
- Other times we may be **entirely justified** – they have injured us

- **Belief affects your behaviour**

- **And here is the rub if you believe that Jesus has reconciled you to God**
- **There is no way that you can continue to live in conflict with those around you**

- **Jesus even tells us himself that if we come to offer him a gift**
- **It is of no value unless we first have been reconciled to our brother**
- **You may have come to church with a fat check in your pocket – don't give it unless you have first made peace**

- **I desire mercy says God – not sacrifice**
- **And so as we come to the table of the Lord if there is any place in your heart where you know that you have not been reconciled**
- **Commit yourself to seek reconciliation today**

- **If you need to seek reconciliation with God – the table is Him reaching out a hand of peace to you – respond not only in action but with your heart**
- **If there are people you know who need to be reconciled to Him or to each other – commit yourself today to do everything in your power to achieve this**
- **Finally if there is someone you need to reconcile with promise yourself before God that you will seek reconciliation as soon as possible**