

Sermon: Standing In The Gap

Text: Philemon vv. 17-25

Introduction:

Are you familiar with the term “mediator”? A mediator is a person who attempts to bring people involved in a conflict together. Mediators are go-betweens.

There are unfortunately times in our lives when we come into conflict with others. Sometimes these hurts and conflicts can run very, very deep. It seems that the closer these people are (family, close friends, etc.), the deeper the hurt is. It is (sadly!) not uncommon for hurts and grievances to last for thirty—forty—fifty—plus years. We often carry them right to the grave. We can go through an entire life holding on to bitterness and unforgiveness. I’ve spoken with people who, when I ask them what happened all those years ago that caused there to be a division, can’t even remember what actually took place! Layer upon layer of hurt and bitterness.

Have you ever considered how much emotional energy goes into holding on to grudges and hurt? We can actually spend hour upon hour of our day nursing grudges (self-talk)—and reminding ourselves of why we have the right to hold on to our anger. It’s a downward spiral that has no bottom. And at the end of the day—WE are the ones who are trapped and negatively impacted (not the other person or persons). The thief called “bitterness” robs from US.

This division and frustration can be compounded when we realize that, at times, even when we make changes in our own heart, the other person or persons seem immovable. The situation can get to a point when it’s bigger than us. We need help. We need a mediator. Someone who will help bring us together, act as a referee, and infuse ideas that we can often be blind to.

This is the situation as we come to the final 9 verses of the Book of Philemon. As we learned last week, a man named Onesimus (who had been a slave in Philemon’s home) ran away and stole some money in the process. As abhorrent and wrong as slavery was and is, Philemon still would have felt wronged and cheated. From a legal standpoint, he could have pressed capital charges against Onesimus and had him put to death (and possibly shamed by all of his friends for not doing so).

But God stepped in and changed everything. Onesimus became a Christian after somehow meeting Paul in Rome. He is now willing to GO BACK to Philemon and face up to what he had done (not easy to do!). But he doesn’t go empty-handed. He has a letter written by the Apostle Paul. In this letter, Paul makes clear to Philemon that he’s not actually dealing with Onesimus—he’s dealing with Paul himself. Whatever amount of money Onesimus owes—it is Paul who will pay it. Whatever anger Philemon feels towards Onesimus—he needs to direct it at Paul. It’s the ultimate act of mediation and reconciliation. Paul is standing in the gap.

Why? Because Onesimus is no longer a slave. He’s a brother. The Gospel changes everything. Onesimus is Paul’s adopted son in Christ—and Philemon’s fellow brother in the Lord. This letter is a masterful picture of reconciliation, mediation, and the Upper Story!

Examination:

- Read **Philemon vv. 17-25**

- The first word of v. 17 signals a transition. The NIV uses the word “So”. Other translations use the word “Therefore” or “If then”. Whenever we see this word, it tells us that the main point is coming. Everything that Paul has said up to this point in the letter is leading to this. With that in mind, what does Paul say in v. 17? What is his point? Why has he written this letter?
- Paul understands that respect and trust form the basis of Philemon’s response to his “ask”. And make no mistake about it—what Paul is asking of Philemon is HUGE. If Philemon doesn’t respect and view Paul as trustworthy, there’s no way that he will do what Paul is asking. What, according to verse 17, is Paul hoping that Philemon considers him to be? What do you think he means by this?
- How do you think Philemon would have welcomed Paul? How crazy is it for Philemon to welcome a runaway thief and previous slave back into his home in the same way that he would have welcomed Paul?
- What Paul says in v. 18 sounds a lot like what Jesus said when He died on the cross for our sins. Theologians call this the principle of “substitution.” Talk about what you think this means.
- Why do you think Paul wrote this part in his own handwriting?
- Up to this point in the letter, Paul has not used any imperatives (commands or requests). He now uses four imperatives in verses 17-22: “Welcome”; “Charge”; and “Refresh”; and “Prepare”. Take some time to think about and discuss each of these directives. Why does Paul make each of these requests?
- Think for a minute about Onesimus. He’s a runaway slave. He’s basically a fugitive. He has no family. He has likely spent whatever he stole from Philemon to even get to Rome. He basically has nothing and no one—and no way to repay Philemon for what he has done. What do you think it meant to him for Paul to offer to repay all charges and debts? Why do you think Paul did this (see vv. 10 & 12). How is this a picture of what Jesus has done for us?
- In the second half of v. 19, Paul changes his tone a little bit. How does Paul start to put some pressure on Philemon to comply with his wishes?
- What “benefit in the Lord” does Paul hope to receive from Philemon? (v. 20)
- It is clear from v. 21 what Paul truly expects. What do you make of the way that he says it?
- Verse 22 is a classic example of: “Oh, and one more thing...”. Why do you think Paul indicates that once he gets out of prison (as he expects will happen in answer to the many prayers), he wants to come and visit Philemon?
- What do you think it mean to hear that Pastor Epaphras, Philemon’s pastor and good friend, sends his greetings?
- Discuss some of your overall impressions of this letter. What have you learned? What stands out to you? What should we learn from this letter?

Application:

Take some time to thank Jesus for standing in the gap for you. He died to rescue you. He paid your debt in full. He will stand beside you before God the Father to defend and deliver you.