

The Final Appeal, p.2

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Bible Text: Philemon 1:15-17
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Grab your Bibles and go to Philemon. Philemon 1, because that's the only chapter there is, and we will begin in verse 15 and go through verse 17 this morning.

I began this before Easter, this particular message, and it became a two-parter and I've entitled this exposition "The Final Appeal." As Paul begins this letter to Philemon, well, he has actually stated, "Philemon, I'm not going to command you to do what is right." He says, "Now, I have the authority to do that. I function as your pastor, even more than that, I'm an apostle and I have the authority, Philemon, to tell you, to command you to do the right thing here in how you receive back this runaway slave, Onesimus. But I'm not going to do that." Paul says, "Instead, I'm going to appeal to you." And I'm so glad in God's sovereignty he did that because there are rich wonderful insights on how you and I are to conduct ourselves as Christians in the world, yes, but most particularly in our families and in the church family. You see, Christians deal with each other in a special and unique way as compared to how the world would deal with each other or even how we would deal with folks who are not saved and in the world. So there are rich truths and insights that unfold from this letter as the runaway slave, Onesimus, who met Paul in a Roman prison, was gloriously converted, became a wonderful assistant to Paul there, but now he's being sent back by Paul to his master, Philemon.

Now here's what you've got to remember if you're new around here, or maybe haven't gotten in on the study, Paul and Philemon go back a long way. Philemon lives in Ephesus. Paul preached and ministered for three years in Ephesus and from all indications, he had known Philemon for a number of years now and from the way he writes the letter, it's obvious he has the highest esteem for this layman in the church there in Ephesus. Philemon is a wealthy man. He's a man of probably much power and influence and esteem in the community, and because of his wealth and his abilities, he's been a great blessing to the local church there in his area. As a matter of fact, the church met in his house and so Paul has this long, rich, deep, brotherly love relationship with this man named Philemon. So he meets Philemon's runaways slave, Onesimus, Paul does, he gives him a letter and says, "Now go back to Philemon and give Philemon this letter," and that's what we have as the book of Philemon in our New Testaments. Paul is appealing in the letter to Philemon about the way he is to receive Onesimus back and he comes to these final aspects of his appeal, thus my sermon title, "The Final Appeal."

Look at it in verses 15 through verse 17. Paul writes as he continues in his appeal to Philemon,

15 For perhaps he [that's Onesimus, the runaway slave] was for this reason separated from you for a while, that you would have him back forever, 16 no longer as a slave, but more than a slave, a beloved brother, especially to me, but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord. 17 If then you regard me [the Apostle Paul, that is] a partner, accept him [Onesimus] as you would me [the Apostle Paul].

We talked last time, I, about the sovereign purposes. The sovereign purposes. As Paul is writing, as Philemon gets this letter from his returned runaway slave, Onesimus, Philemon opens the letter and when he gets down to this point he reads this line, verse 15, "For perhaps he was for this reason separated from you for a while, that you would have him back forever." So Paul says to Philemon, "Philemon, don't you see God is behind all of this? Don't you see a sovereign hand, the hand of divine providence is really behind all of these events? No, you can't blame God for Onesimus' rebellion. He ran away, that was wrong. He needs to return and get that right." That's the way the laws were of that day. "But God was behind it all because Onesimus while he was in his fugitive state, if you will, heard the Gospel and gloriously he's been saved, he's been wonderfully transformed. He's become a great help to me personally and now he is voluntarily coming back to you, Philemon, to make things right." What a picture this is. "Philemon, God is behind all of this."

Now, God is, Paul let me say it that way, Paul is up to something. He is being tactful and careful in the way he reproves and exhorts Philemon in his hopeful gesture of receiving Onesimus back, and I think the point Paul is making is God did something wonderful and good in changing Onesimus from a pagan nonbeliever into a devoted follower of Jesus Christ. "God has done something wonderful, Philemon. He has changed this man who was your slave. He is bringing him back. He is coming back now not just to say he will yield to your authority, Philemon, but he's coming back to say, 'I'm your brother in Christ. Now I want to work with you, Philemon, as a brother and honor you as a brother.'" So the implication is, "Now since God has done this good thing in bringing back this servant of yours and bringing him back not as just a slave but as a dear brother in Christ, now Philemon, isn't it understood that you likewise should do good? You likewise, Philemon, should do the right thing. You should forgive this man completely. You should be reconciled with this man fully and you should dissolve forever any notion of a secular or carnal view of master and slave. He is no longer that, he is now your brother in Christ."

So Paul doesn't say it with commanding authority, "God did this," he's saying perhaps wasn't God up to all of this in changing him and bringing them back to you? And I pointed out to you last time we were together how the greatest thing in our life, we see the sovereign hand, we see divine providence behind it all. Think of all the things and all the series of events that worked in your life to bring you to the place where you became a believer in the Lord Jesus Christ. And by the way, Christian, can I say to you: nothing,

nothing in our lives just happens. God, the best way we can term it, God causes some things to happen and God may allow some things to happen but things just don't happen. A hand of divine providence is behind everything for your good and for his glory, but we are required to assume responsibility to respond right. Why are you in the place you are in today? Why are you in the good place you are in today? Or why are you in a tough place you are in today? Divine providence is up to something. And by the way, he's not done yet. He works all things together for the good to those who love him and to those who are called according to his purposes. All things are not good but God who loves us is working all things together for our good if we love him and if we are one of the called ones according to his purposes.

So Paul exhorts Philemon that a sovereign hand, a sovereign purpose is behind all of these things. So I ended in the last session asking you, asking myself: are you like Paul as Paul is working diligently, carefully, tactfully, even gently at times, to help Philemon come to a full forgiveness toward this runaway, Onesimus? Can I ask you mom and dad? Can I ask you older Christian? Do you work to help those under you learn to forgive those who have wronged them? Do you encourage forgiveness like Paul encouraged Philemon to be a forgiving man? Now, Paul had a lot of confidence in Philemon. He was a faithful churchman. He was a man Paul could depend on. He was a kind of faithful church member Paul could rely upon but he knew Philemon would need some expectation here to do what's right. Are you faithful to do what's right and to always encourage forgiveness? Brothers and sisters, could it not be said based on the balance of biblical teaching that there is no Christian virtue greater than forgiveness? And there is nothing more contrary to the Spirit of Christ in Christianity than unforgiveness. Paul puts great effort into helping Philemon come to a place – now listen to me – to help Philemon come to a place where not under coercion but from Philemon's own heart he desires and will act out forgiveness toward Onesimus.

Now, maybe Onesimus was like an indentured servant, maybe Onesimus had a legitimate financial debt of some kind that he owed Philemon and Philemon said, "Okay, you become my servant for this season and we'll forgive the debt." So it might be more than just this harsh and cruel slave/master relationship that perhaps we are used to in other settings. We know in the Roman empire there are all levels and types of slaves and many of them are much like a contract employee. A lot of slaves were doctors. A lot of slaves were engineers. They were hired by wealthy men and they were called slaves but they wouldn't be the slaves maybe the way the African-Americans were treated in early America or in Britain or wherever they were treated that way. So perhaps there is a real reason where Paul would say or Philemon would say, "But this guy, you understand, this wasn't me just grabbing him out of a culture and forcing him into slavery, he literally owes me and this was his way of relieving that legitimate debt." But despite all of that, underneath all of that, Paul is working diligently to stir Philemon's heart, let the Spirit of God do its work to bring Philemon to that place where he could with his heart and from his heart, look at Onesimus and say, "You're forgiven." Do you and I, do we help others be forgiving? Never help someone repay evil for evil.

Now of course in balance, there is a proper way that wrongdoings need to be brought to justice in our culture, and even in the church there is time for reprimands and restitution, but from the heart we don't wish evil against others who committed evil against us. We're Christians, we don't do that. Never help someone grow in bitterness. Oh my goodness, never never never never do that. When you see somebody is hurt and they are lashing back, sure you show them compassion and you have a consoling spirit and an understanding spirit, "Yes, I understand how you're hurt. But oh brother, don't do that. Let that go. Remember the cross. Remember how evil we are against our Savior and he died for us. God has given you the strength and the grace to respond back in good even though he or she did evil to you." Never help someone grow in unforgiveness. Never help someone in retaliation or revenge. Proverbs 20:22 reminds us, "Do not say, 'I will repay evil'; Wait for the LORD, and He will save you." Romans 12:19 through 20, "Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written," God says, "'Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,' says the Lord." You don't repay, God will repay. God will render out justice. But instead of repaying your enemy, "But if your enemy is hungry, you feed him. If he's thirsty, give him a drink; for in doing so you will heap burning coals on his head."

Well, Paul is writing this letter to Philemon. It is delivered to Philemon by the guilty party, Onesimus, and he is working diligently to bring Philemon to that point of forgiveness and reconciliation. Now, II. Not only is providence behind all that has gone on to bring about this good end to this bad situation, we see some bulwarks that hold back prejudice. That's II. Bulwarks that hold back prejudice. Prejudice is that ill-will or low view of someone without any basis. We just immediately off the bat classify them as lesser or as inferior in some way or shape or fashion, and there is no basis in reality for it.

What are some bulwarks that Christianity gives us that holds that kind of prejudice out?
1. We can remind ourselves that we are all brothers, and I mean the whole world now, not just the church, we are all brothers in flesh. In the flesh, we are all brothers. Notice how Paul words it here in verse 16. He is implying that now Onesimus is coming back to you, now verse 16, "no longer as a slave, but more than a slave, a beloved brother, especially to me, but how much more to you," now here it is, "both in the flesh and in the Lord." I'm convinced that Paul brings that little separating phrase there, "both in the flesh and in the Lord," he says, "He's your brother in the Lord but there is a sense in which he's your brother in the flesh too." He's another human being. We are all brothers in the flesh.

In the second paragraph of the United States Declaration of Independence, it states and I quote, "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal." Simple but profound. We hold these truths to be self-evident, all men are created equal. In writing that, our founding fathers were saying that there is no inherent superiority in any one subgroup over another, color of skin, ethnic background, it just doesn't matter. There is no inherent, no inborn superiority of one group of humankind over another group of humankind. Now here's where our liberal friends get it wrong, that is, they feel like since that's true, there must be a guarantee of outcomes for everyone living. If you don't guarantee a certain level of socioeconomic outcome for everybody, then somehow you are unjust or inequitable. That's wrong. The Bible doesn't teach that part. We do know

that even though all men are created equally, all men do not behave equally, and even sometimes groups of people are so alike in behaving badly the whole group can be characterized according to their character. Martin Luther King was right, men should not be judged by the color of their skin or by any other reason but by the content of their character. The Bible supports that. Martin Luther King wasn't right, the Bible was right, it was just that he was right with the Bible.

As a matter of fact, if you would, turn a few pages over in Titus. Would you do that? Titus, let's go to chapter 1 and I find this a very interesting statement, especially in the climate of our culture of this day where there is this ultra-aggressive notion that you can't ever judge anyone by the content of their character, especially if they come from certain groups. It's off limits. You can't in any way say anything, even if it's true, about certain people.

Here Paul writes to Titus. Now you need to understand the background, Titus is on the island of Crete and he's trying to straighten out a very unruly and rebellious church. Now, the church in Crete was very unruly and undisciplined because the Cretan people were that kind of people and when they got converted to, they needed a lot of sanctification and growing to even begin to look like Christians. So Titus is appointed by Paul, "Go to Crete and see if you can get this wayward, rebellious, and in some ways barbaric acting church in line with God." And here's a statement he makes. I'm in Titus 1:12, "One of themselves, a prophet of their own," he said, "Now Cretans, I've said this about Cretans, said, 'Cretans are always liars, evil beasts, lazy gluttons.'" So Paul says, "No, wait a minute. Let's be kind and careful here." It doesn't say that, does it? Look at verse 13, "This testimony is true." They are liars, they are gluttons and they are evil beasts. It's true. This ethnic group, generally speaking, can be accurately characterized by their conduct and that's their conduct. "This testimony is true," verse 13. "For this reason reprove them severely so that they may be sound in the faith."

So when a person's conduct merits that they be treated differently, then they have to be treated differently. When a group's conduct merits they be treated differently, they have to be treated differently, but all things being equal, all men are equally made in the image of God and all men are equally fallen in sin, and all men are to be treated equally except when in accordance with their own behavior, they demand to be treated otherwise. For example, a man goes out and he murders somebody. Well, a murderer no longer has the equal rights everybody else has. His conduct, his character, has required he be viewed differently so he can no longer enjoy the freedoms and liberties as the rest of the culture. But again, all things being equal, and this is one of the bulwarks that holds back prejudice, we all began, no matter who we are, what is our color, or where we come from, we all began this journey equal before God. This is an indissoluble axiom, which is redundant because if it's indissoluble, it's an axiom, it's an axiom, then it's indissoluble. But anyway, we are all brothers in the flesh. No one group has superiority over any other group. Period.

Now remember, this is something the Jewish Jews had real problems with when they became Christians. The Jews were absolutely 1,000% fully convinced they were God's

special elite people. You couldn't even become one of God's people unless you first became a Jew. And then the Gospel hits. Jesus begins preaching. The Apostle Paul, a Jew, begins preaching. Peter begins preaching. And they begin preaching the same message to all men and it was quite a journey for the believing Christian Jews to accept that all these people are all inherently equal to us before God? And the Bible would say, "Yes! Get over your prejudice." We all come from the same starting point. We are all brothers in the flesh.

Now, the second bulwark that holds back prejudice, not only are we all brothers naturally or in the flesh, we are all brothers in Christ. Now, there we get down to just the church. Here we get down to just those who are truly repenters and faithers in Jesus Christ. As he says to Philemon here, we are back Philemon now and we are in verse 16, "Onesimus is coming back to you, Philemon, but no longer as a slave but more than a slave, a beloved brother." Not just a brother, but a beloved brother. That is, Christians have a spiritual brotherhood. I want to say to you as emphatically as I can say it, I don't care if you're Asian or Chinese or African or European in your background, once you come to Jesus Christ, you're my brother. Period. I don't like this thing of all this categorizing people in these categories. There are only two categories: you are either lost or you are found. You are either blind or you see. You are either in the kingdom of Satan and the world, or you are in the kingdom of God. And I'm telling you, if you don't believe it this way, you're wrong. Your brothers and sisters in Christ have more in common with you than your own blood relatives who do not know Jesus Christ. Christianity is a divine spiritual brotherhood that bypasses and extends beyond, it transcends time all the way into eternity and the church should picture that in time what is going to be true in eternity.

This brotherhood, this unity, this bonding we have as believers in Jesus Christ, is the greatest and highest bond that exists in the universe. I don't exactly know how to say this but the Scriptures seem to indicate that what you and I have together is as strong as the bond God the Father has with God the Son, and God the Father and God the Son have with God the Spirit. Now if you want to go to John, why don't you turn there? Turn to John 17, would you do that? Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, and go to John 17 and you'll remember that John 17 is Jesus' high priestly prayer. He's praying on behalf of of his followers and he prays specifically for his immediate followers, his disciples that he chose and has had with him, and the believers who are with them, but he also prays in a greater sense for all of those who will be his followers in all ages. Notice John 17:11. He's praying to his Father and he says, "I am no longer in the world; and yet they themselves are in the world," that's us, that's his followers, "and I come to You. Holy Father, keep them in Your name, the name which You have given Me, that they may be one even as We are." Notice, "that they may be one even as We are." The "are" there, that final word is not in the original language, "even as We, that they may be one even as We. They are to have a dynamic bond far beyond anything the world can comprehend, that is, the same bond, heavenly Father, that you and I have." That's powerful. That is powerful.

Now go further down to verse 21, John 17:21, "that they may all be one; even as You, Father, are in Me and I in You," they have the same kind of oneness, Father, that you and I, God the Son and God the Father have between each other, "that they also may be in Us,

so that the world may believe that You sent Me." Jesus on another occasion said, "All men will know you are My disciples by the love you have one for another." He doesn't mean your general love for mankind there, he means there is a specific, unique, deep, Spirit-enabled love that Christians have for Christians that the world can't grasp. It's greater. It's more wonderful. It's more powerful. It's more beautiful. So when the world sees us Christians in this kind of unity and oneness, they marvel over it and they say only God could do that.

So here Jesus prays in his high priestly prayer and he prays the same basic thing, "May they have such a oneness, Father, like you and I are one so that when the world sees them, they will know that they are descendants of us, they are born of God, they are like their heavenly Father." So the Spirit that makes us as Christians one is God himself. Now there is no room for prejudice. There is no room for any notion of, "Well, this group is inherently better or superior or whatever." It's just absolutely non-Christian. It's the Spirit that makes us one.

The prayer of Jesus is that we would stay united and stay of one. You remember the occasion when Peter under the cultural pressure, can I say that again, the cultural pressure of the day. Us Christian European descendants, we're the majority and we've got to make sure that when we act in the church and when we act in the world, we do not succumb to cultural pressures, and those of you who may be of a minority in this country but you are our Christian brother or sister, you likewise must not react according to the cultural preferences or pressures of the day, but we are to act according to the word of God. We are to act as Jesus prayed, that we would be one. There are no minority Christians. There are no Christians in a minority community. There are no majority Christians. There are no Christians in a majority community. They are just Christians. I hate that nonsense. It's of Satan. It's not of God. It's meant to divide and build enmity and build bitterness and build division. That's all it's for. It's just not of God.

You see, any thought of any inequality among believers – now listen to this – is either one, to deny the presence of the Spirit in some believers, or number two, to deny that the Spirit exists equally in all believers. If it's the Spirit that makes us equal and the Spirit that makes us one, the only way there could be any inequality or anyone better than the other is that the Spirit got in one but he didn't get in the other, or more of the Spirit got in one than got in the other. You can't chop him up. He's a person. You either have the Spirit or you don't have the Spirit. Some of our charismatic friends I think really pervert sound doctrine when they begin to teach that people have different levels of spirituality based on different experiences. Now, you may be walking in the Spirit more but we all have the same Holy Spirit that makes us one.

Well, there is a balancing truth again here. While all our brothers in Christ, all brothers in Christ do not behave equally. We do know there can be a brother or a sister walk in such an obstinate and unrepentant manner that they may even be excommunicated from a church. To give you an example, there are certain character qualifications for men to even be considered as elders in the church. There are character qualifications for widow ladies being put on the help list in the church, Paul wrote to Timothy. There are character

qualifications for men that the pastor would put in his discipleship group, 2 Peter 2:22. So Martin Luther King is right again. Even in the church, certain rights, certain offices, certain privileges, are based on the content of your character. It's not because you inherently are supposed to get something. You're not supposed to have something given to you.

So Paul writes very clearly here that there are some bulwarks that will hold out prejudice. First of all, let's all remember we are all created equal, all equally sinners, and all equally can be saved before God. That ought to be enough right there. We are equal in the flesh, we are a brotherhood in the flesh with all mankind, but then much more powerful than that, we have a unity and a oneness as a Christian brotherhood. Then lastly, there is a third bulwark against prejudice and that is that we are in ministry partnership. In ministry partnership. Look at verse 17 and Philemon here, he says as he's writing to Philemon, "If then you regard me," Philemon, if you regard me, the Apostle Paul, "as a partner, then accept him," Onesimus, your runaway slave, "as you would me." We're all partners in this. Are you listening to me, church? God didn't just save you to bless you and get you to heaven, God saved you and enlisted you in a local church to be a part of the army of God. We have a partnership in this great conquest he has called us all to. Some of you are AWOL on God. You're not a good partner. And Paul in the context here, though, the context is, "Onesimus is an equal partner with me, Paul, and therefore, Philemon, Onesimus ought to be an equal partner with you, Philemon." Do you not see how Paul without forcefully externally commanding the removal of the master/slave relationship completely obliterates it from the heart out? Is that not beautiful beyond compare?

So here we understand that we all can have deep empathy one toward the other and a deep sense of equality one with the other because we are all Christians, we are all weak, we are all undeserving, we are all forgiven sinners, and we are all in this partnership together. Think about how the Apostle Paul overcame prejudice. You and I have no way to grasp the magnitude of what I'm about to say. When the Apostle Paul gives his testimony, do you know what he says? He said, "Man, I was a Pharisee of the Pharisees." He said, "You take the most devout group of Jews, the Pharisees, I was at the top of that group." And one of the ways you earned yourself to the heights of being a Pharisee among the Jews was that you absolutely had no tolerance for non-Jews. You had no acceptance of what they called the Gentile dogs. Then Jesus Christ invades Saul of Tarsus at that time, invades Saul's heart, transforms his heart, makes him a new creature in Christ Jesus, and all of a sudden he goes from an arrogant, proud, prejudiced Jew to being the apostle to the Gentiles. Isn't that amazing? That would be greater, I believe, in many ways, than having the most abused and unjustly treated minority person in America come to Christ and turn around and look at those who abused him and say, "My ministry is now to love them and win them to Jesus." You say, "What about da, da, da?" He said, "What about it? That's gone. That doesn't matter. Christ has given me the capacity to forget the past. This is about his glory and about the future." Oh, these are bulwarks that obliterate the prejudice that rises in all of our hearts.

These real convictions, these bulwarks against prejudice, completely dismantle social injustices and they dismantle them from the inside out where it really matters. You want

to have a just and sane society? Then you ought to promote the preaching of the Gospel. That's the greatest force against it. Now, that does not eliminate the need for social causes and social issues. I agree with that 110%, but listen to me: those issues cannot replace the power of the Gospel. Slavery in its crudest and lowest forms, slavery cannot possibly exist in the climate of Christian love and brotherhood. It just can't exist. It's absolutely incompatible with Christianity.

So while Paul does not through external force remove the relationship of slave and master, especially this particular one between Onesimus and his master Philemon, he does expect the entire spirit and the tone of their relationship to be radically changed. Onesimus is now Philemon's equal. Of course, he was before, I'm just saying it's dawning on both of them though, Onesimus and Philemon. We're equals. We're brothers. And this truth must be held foremost in both of their minds in their future relationship. Does not the Gospel itself restore the universal equality of all mankind? Is not the ground level at the cross? And through Gospel power, we see universal dignity and the preciousness of each individual soul. So from now on, Paul is expecting Philemon, the former master, to keep the bulwarks of sound truth and sound thinking foremost in his dealing with all men but especially now with his former slave, Onesimus.

But here's a Christian truth that the culture would scoff against but it is right for Onesimus to go back and honor his master, Philemon, the same way it is right for a wife to honor her husband though he might not be a great husband. The same reason an employee is to submit to his employer, work for him like we are working unto the Lord. Do you know why? Because we trust when we do that for God's glory, God works on their hearts in ways we could never change them. I've seen that. You've just got to decide, are you going to fight your fights or let God fight your fights? I'm going to tell you, God is bigger than you are. He's stronger than you are. He's mightier than you are. You'd better let God fight your fights. "God, I'm going to submit to this guy and trust you to keep his heart right." I'm telling you, if a man knows the Lord but he's not treating his wife right, if she honors him and submits to him and he looks at her and says, "Why are you doing this?" She says, "I'm trusting the Lord to get you right," and just walks off, she won't sleep that next night because that next night he'll flop all night long. Let God make you a good husband. You'd better quit trying to make him, you'd better let God make him. Peter said you can win your husband without a word by your chaste and respectful behavior. What he's saying is God will go to work on him and that's what's happening here. As Onesimus comes back with the right spirit, God is going to through his Spirit, crush Philemon's heart and bring him to a sweet, humble, different attitude toward his former slave, Onesimus.

He says there in verse 17, "If then you regard me a partner, accept him as you would me." He is now partners with us. We are in this Christian enterprise together. So this is Paul's final appeal here, this idea of we are Christian partners in ministry together. "Wait a minute, Philemon is not called into the ministry. Onesimus is not likely called to the ministry. Paul, what do you mean they are partners?" Brothers and sisters, we are all partners together.

So as Paul writes to Philemon, he comes to this final appeal on the high and holy bond of Christian fellowship and partnership. This is the best arrow Paul has in his quiver. He has reserved it for the last. He takes aim and releases it from the bow and how precisely it hits the mark as Philemon hears those words, "If I feel like Paul and I are partners, now Paul and I and Onesimus are all partners together." Powerful thought. There can be no more views of inequality in the household of Philemon and extended out to the household of the local church. You see, in Christian fellowship, the richest master on earth is but the Lord's slave and the lowest slave on earth is his equal. It is a fellowship where the greatest are those who serve, and the humblest are the highest. So he says to Philemon, "Now you owe Onesimus the same love, Philemon, and the same fellowship, Philemon, that you've had toward me." Remember, the context lets us know that Paul could count on Philemon. Philemon was a faithful supporter. He is a faithful churchman. He is a faithful partner with Paul for many years now.

In Christ, when one member suffers, all the members suffer together. In Christ, when one member rejoices, all the members rejoice together. "Onesimus," Paul is saying to Philemon, "is my brother and now Onesimus is your brother. He has been at my side as an invaluable assistant in ministry and now even more, he's a brother to you and a partner in ministry to you. He's an extension of myself, so if you can't receive Onesimus as an equal brother in Christ, then our relationship, Philemon, is severed." That's where Paul is going. "If he's not a partner and he's not equal, then I'm out. I'm out." Now I've said it a lot forcefully than Paul wrote it but that's what he's saying. "He's an extension of me but, Philemon," in the whole flow of the context of what Paul is saying, "when you receive Onesimus back, you are forgiving him and restoring him to you now as a beloved brother, he is now a part of your family as an equal beloved family member, and he is now a part of the local church that meets in your house. So Philemon, you've been this," what he's saying, "I trust you're going to be this glorious" – are you listening, church – "this glorious illustration of how the Gospel changes everything, especially how it brings us to forgiveness, reconciliation, and equality."

Real quick six essential convictions. I'll not much more than mention them. Six essential convictions from our text so far. 1. Always forgiving. Always forgiving. Yes, there are times when people have to suffer the consequence and be held accountable for what they do wrong. I'm not saying that, I'm saying from our hearts we do not hold things against people for punishment. We release it. Always forgiving.

2. Always reconciling. The church is an ongoing living organism of forgiveness and reconciliation. Forgiveness and reconciliation. Forgiveness and reconciliation. It didn't just happen, it's always happening in the church. Did you hear me? There is no basis under God for anybody to get at odds with another brother or sister in their church and run off and leave like a big baby. Always forgiveness and reconciliation if we are real. Did you hear me? Did I make that clear enough? Always forgiving. Always reconciling.

3. Never fostering bitterness. In my experience, the only problems I have with forgiveness, reconciliation, and overcoming bitterness, the only problem I have there is

me. It's about me. But when I die to me and I think about the glory of God and the good of the church, it gets easy. Never fostering bitterness.

4. Never encouraging retaliation. I mean, in this whole letter there is not one tiny hint that Paul would allow Philemon to even think about a retaliatory spirit toward his runaway slave, much less compensation or the way he has robbed from his master by leaving. I mean, never retaliation.

5. Living illustrations. We want our ongoing church relationships to be living illustrations of the great wisdom of God and the power of God in the way we forgive, reconcile, restore broken relationships. That should be an ongoing reality of Grace Life Church of the Shoals that we want our lives to be living illustrations of the power and the wisdom of God. We can forgive each other and be reconciled with each other when every other group in the world would split.

Can I just be straight up with you this morning? A whole a lot of people leave churches because they are not Christians. They don't have the power to get it fixed. They are too consumed with themselves to get it right and keep the church going in unity. "Well, they look like Christians." Have you not learned that Satan can counterfeit better than a lot of true Christians can look like Christians? "But they cry so much. They are so sweet. They are so caring." Satanic counterfeit. If you don't love the church, there is something greatly faulty in your Christianity. I'm not talking about most congregations, I'm talking about if God has put you in a decently healthy church and there is not something in you of a growing love and devotion to want to keep that thing and be connected to that entity, then there is something faulty in your Christianity. We want to be living illustrations of God's wisdom and power in the way that we forgive and reconcile as an ongoing process in our church family life. And by the way, you do that very well here and as I've said to you before, because you live out so much of this, it can make us think we're special. We're not special. We're barely normal. We're not special. We're just not. It's just that most congregations are so subnormal if a congregation barely acts normal, everybody thinks they are abnormal.

6. We tenaciously hold that all types of human prejudice to be radically inconsistent with Christianity. We hold unswervingly, without one iota of drifting away from that position, that all aspects of human prejudice are radically inconsistent with Christianity. It's just not there.

Well, those are some aspects of Paul's final appeal. How are we doing, Grace Life Church? The call to many of us this morning would be this – are you listening? Why are you putting your Bibles up? Listen. You can put them up, I don't care, just listen while you are putting them up. Repent of yourself, get over yourself, and make the glory of God and the good of the church the primary thing in your heart and then forgiveness and reconciliation in the body gets easy. Now, I don't know anybody that is mad and fighting right now. If you are mad and fighting, I don't want to know about it, just get over it and get it right. Amen?