

“Stick Like Glue“

Philemon 1:8-21

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All Scripture quoted from NIV unless otherwise noted

Think for a moment about the process of gluing things together. No, not your sibling's fingers – more like gluing together the pieces of a broken item, such as a coffee cup whose handle has broken off, or a piece of furniture that's lost a leg. The process is usually the same, right? Clean up the pieces, apply an appropriate adhesive, and jam the pieces back together. Simple enough, right? The glue works by adhering the two things together; it is an essential part of the bond, and your job is merely to apply it and bring the two parts together, then get yourself out of the way. If you're like me, every time you use Superglue, you end up stuck to the pieces you were trying to adhere together.

Part of your job as a Christ-follower is to help restore the bond of healthy relationships between believers. *The call to follow Christ is a call to unity, and like a chain, our unity is only as strong as the weakest bond between us.* We all have a responsibility to and for each other, to help restore relationships that have fractured and bring (or bring back) unity among those of the household of faith. Paul was aware of that; so he wrote a letter.

In the Biblical book of Philemon, Paul addresses a conflict that had arisen between two followers of the Christian faith. One man, Philemon, who was evidently a wealthy Christ follower who lived in Colossae and another man, Onesimus, who was one of his slaves. To be clear, the Bible does not condone slavery; it was a part of the culture of the time, and the Bible talks about people who lived in that culture.

In any event, Onesimus had run off and, under Paul's teaching in Rome, become a Christian. Now Paul is writing to promote reconciliation between these two (now) brothers in Christ. Paul was fulfilling his responsibility to ensure and restore unity among brothers in Christ. It is just as much your responsibility, and mine, to encourage and facilitate reconciliation and unity between believers today, for when two are weak in unity, we all are weak in unity.

There are several things that we can learn about this from Paul's example about how to help others achieve relational reconciliation from the short book of Philemon, and the first may be the need to wave your right to authority and appeal on the basis of love (v.8-9). Appeals based on love are always stronger than arguments based on authority, and as such, you can help individuals reconcile their differences much more effectively through love than you can through the wielding of authority.

Paul certainly had authority, both as an apostle of Jesus Christ, and in the name of his Lord, but chose rather to ask Philemon to consider restoring the relationship, and even 'upgrading' the relationship, now that Onesimus had become a fellow believer in Jesus Christ.

A second lesson we can learn from Paul's appeal to Philemon is to pave the way for reconciliation. When you glue something together, it requires some surface preparation; *sometimes that means you have to scuff the surface in order for the bond to hold. This preparation does not damage the pieces; merely prepares the surfaces for the bond that is to take hold. Sometimes healing stings*, though. You may have to admit you were wrong, you may have to make restitution to another, to take a loss (financial, status, reputation, etc.) in order to restore the relationship, or you may have to even risk your relationship with one or both of the offending parties in order to get them to reconcile their differences. No one wants to do that, but it certainly helps if you've developed a relationship capital with the individuals involved.

Building relationship capital is another thing we learn from Paul's letter to Philemon. The difference between peacemaking and meddling often comes down to relationship capital. This is the amount of trust that exists within a given relationship. It takes time to develop relationship capital, but it also grows when we get to know and learn to trust one another, sharing mutual experiences like Men's Link or Quilting retreats, Missions conference experiences or Wednesday night Bible studies, Fellowship dinners or visits at one another's homes. Relationship capital is what gives you the right to speak into another person's life – gives you the authority to call them into a place of repentance, healing, forgiveness, and reconciliation.

Paul has relationship capital with both Philemon and Onesimus, yet he is still taking a risk when he asks Philemon to receive back Onesimus with forgiveness and grace. But Onesimus was now a changed man (v.10-13, 16), and Paul was willing to put himself on the line for this – even offering to pay all that is demanded of Onesimus' debt on his behalf. This is kingdom work – this is important! Furthermore, this is what Christ did for you – He offered to pay a debt that he did not owe, because you were unable to pay it yourself, demonstrating the truth that *substitution is at the heart of Christianity. After all, Jesus offered to take on your sin and all your wrongdoing, so you could be reconciled to the Father, counted as one who is righteous, because of the work of the One who actually is, and that is why he came. We must do likewise, for kingdom work of establishing and maintaining unity among believers is everyone's responsibility.*

All of us have been Onesimus, and wronged someone else; all of us have been Philemon, who was wronged by another. But have you been Paul? Have you been the one to stand in the gap between two individuals who had a conflict or disagreement and call them to healing and reconciliation? Are you willing to serve as a neutral party who desires the best possible outcome for who individuals and who has the relationship capital with each of them to speak into their situation? Is this not what we should learn from Paul's letter to Philemon?

This passage is not primarily a call to forgive or to repent, though these things are both necessary in our lives. Rather, this is a call for you to be involved in peacemaking ministry between brothers and sisters in the Lord. Stop telling yourself that there's nothing you can do and start living like there's nothing you won't do in order to see reconciliation within the body of believers. This reconciliation is not merely toleration – the goal is not surface-level civility or a formal agreement to keep the peace as long as your path doesn't cross with the other person's path.

True reconciliation means restoration, and it *has a ripple effect* throughout the body; it shows that healing has taken place, that forgiveness has been extended, and that community has been restored. Just as every chain is dependent upon the weakest link to be strong, so to is the fellowship of believers dependent upon YOU being involved in peacemaking ministries within this body, in order to strengthen each relationship within the family of faith.

Be willing to put yourself on the line for the sake of your brothers and sisters in Christ. Be willing to risk it all – all the time and energy you've invested in developing relationship capital on both sides of the issue – and speak boldly, yet kindly, in the authority you have in Jesus Christ. Don't get caught in the middle of a quarrel – instead, draw the two sides together, for the purpose of reconciliation and seek God's wisdom and guidance as you help the two sides, once so clearly divided and distanced from one another, to be drawn together, and in the name of Jesus Christ, to stick like glue to one another, in a whole and healthy relationship. May the God of peace and unity call, equip, and use you to help bring forgiveness, restoration, and reconciliation to those whom He has adopted into His spiritual family.

Takeaways from this message.

The call to follow Christ is a call to UNITY.

Helping others achieve relational reconciliation...

Waive your right to authority and appeal on the basis of LOVE.

- ***Authority...***
 - ***...need not be WIELDED.***
 - ***... is greatest in JESUS Name.***
 - ***...has LIMITATIONS.***

PAVE the WAY for reconciliation.

- ***Sometimes you have to SCUFF the SURFACE.***
- ***Sometimes healing STINGS.***

Build RELATIONSHIP CAPITAL with others.

- **SUBSTITUTION is at the heart of the Christian Faith.**
- **Reconciliation has a RIPPLE effect.**

DIG IN!

Here are some farm-fresh questions that will help you to personalize and apply this morning's message.

1. ***What was most surprising, unexpected, or helpful from today's passage/message? Why?***
2. ***If you could summarize Paul's plea to Onesimus into one word, what word would that be? Why?***
3. ***Think of a time in which it was hard for you to forgive someone. What made it hard to forgive? How did you overcome that difficulty?***
4. ***Which soup best summarizes your life, and why?***
5. ***Is there some other believer with whom you have a conflict? Why hasn't this conflict been resolved? Who might be a neutral party who can help you resolve this conflict?***
6. ***What similarities and differences do you see between Paul and Onesimus? Do you share any of these attributes or characteristics? How so?***
7. ***What will you do in the next 4 months to build 'relationship capital' with others in the body of believers?***
8. ***What have you learned through your personal time of Bible reading this week?***