

RESTORATIVE JUSTICE BIBLE STUDY



A Case Study in Peacemaking

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Matthew 5:9

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God.

Matthew 5:23, 24

²³Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, ²⁴leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother, then come and offer your gift.

(New International Version)

Overview of the Theme for the 2003 Bible Study

Peacemaking can be described as a set of principles, strategies, and actions aimed at settling conflict between individuals or groups at odds with each other. Peacemaking can be accomplished by the parties in dispute, but often it involves the assistance of a neutral “third” party mediator.

In current thought and practice, many distinguish between peacemaking, peacekeeping, and peacebuilding. Peacekeeping involves simply interposing some kind of barrier (whether nonaligned troops or a physical divide) to prevent hostile parties from interacting and antagonizing each other. Peacebuilding – more future-oriented – refers to programs and activities designed to foster reconciled, normal relations between former antagonists.

For our purposes, we ought to envision peacemaking as intrinsically including peacebuilding. That is, true and effective peacemaking genuinely settles or ends a conflict between disputing parties. Yet it also strengthens attitudes, conditions, and behaviors that yield strong, durable relationships between people.

This robust sense of peacemaking fits well with the Biblical theme of peace in both the Old and New Testaments. The ideal of peace and hope for peace – *shalom* – figure prominently in the Old Testament. *Shalom* certainly means an absence of conflict (peacemaking). Yet it goes beyond to signify the fullness of life God intends for his creatures. This life will be vibrant and harmonious with material well-being and good and right relationships between people (peacebuilding).

Likewise, the Greek word for peace – *eirene* – occurs frequently in the New Testament. Jesus gives peace within individuals and makes peace between people. Standard greetings and closings in New Testament letters convey hopes and prayers for peace. The practice of peaceful, love-infused relationships between fellow believers is one of the highest virtues for Christian life and community.

Suggestions for Using this Study Guide

Each lesson in this guide begins with a Scripture passage to read and consider. Along with Scripture, we will find a brief meditation on the particular study topic to read, ponder, and apply. We will also find related questions to assist in reflecting on and applying the topic.

The lessons in the study guide (Scripture passages, meditation, and questions) can be used either as an individual or as part of a group. Here are a few ways to use the study guide:

- Daily devotional
- Training with staff, volunteers, or board members
- Bible study in prison
- Study or information session with local churches, student groups, or Christian professionals
- Study or information sessions for Christian prison personnel and justice officials

LESSON 1: Philemon

Philemon

¹Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother,
²To Philemon our dear friend and fellow worker, to Apphia our sister, to Archippus our fellow soldier and to the church that meets in your home: ³Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. ⁴I always thank my God as I remember you in my prayers, ⁵because I hear about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints. ⁶I pray that you may be active in sharing your faith, so that you will have a full understanding of every good thing we have in Christ. ⁷Your love has given me great joy and encouragement, because you, brother, have refreshed the hearts of the saints. ⁸Therefore, although in Christ I could be bold and order you to do what you ought to do, ⁹yet I appeal to you on the basis of love. I then, as Paul – an old man and now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus – ¹⁰I appeal to you for my son Onesimus,* who became my son while I was in chains. ¹¹Formerly he was useless to you, but now he has become useful both to you and to me. ¹²I am sending him – who is my very heart – back to you. ¹³I would have liked to keep him with me so that he could take your place in helping me while I am in chains for the gospel. ¹⁴But I did not want to do anything without your consent, so that any favor you do will be spontaneous and not forced. ¹⁵Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back for good – ¹⁶no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother. He is very dear to me but even dearer to you, both as a man and as a brother in the Lord. ¹⁷So if you consider me a partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. ¹⁸If he has done you any wrong or owes you anything, charge it to me. ¹⁹I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand. I will pay it back – not to mention that you owe me your very self. ²⁰I do wish, brother, that I may have some benefit from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in Christ. ²¹Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I ask. ²²And one thing more: Prepare a guest room for me, because I hope to be restored to you in answer to your prayers. ²³Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends you greetings. ²⁴And so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas and Luke, my fellow workers. ²⁵The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.

*Onesimus means useful.

Note: Philemon was a wealthy man and a leader of the church. Onesimus, his slave, is thought to have stolen something, fled, and was captured. He then met Paul in prison. As a friend of both men, Paul wrote this letter to help them resolve their conflict and to repair the harm done by Onesimus.

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Reflection Questions:



1. How does Paul describe the conflict between Onesimus and Philemon? What issues, relational and otherwise, does Paul identify? What positives, relational and otherwise, does Paul highlight? How does Paul address and treat the parties involved in this problem?

2. What resolution does Paul propose? What do you think of Paul's proposal?

As we saw in the introduction to this study, followers of Jesus are called to be peacemakers. The logical question is, “How?” Jesus blessed those who are peacemakers, yet he did not provide a program for the practice of peacemaking. How, then, can we know what to do to bring reconciliation between people who are in conflict?

Thankfully, we find one book in the Bible devoted completely to a person’s attempt to bring about reconciliation between a victim and his offender. The approach reflects principles of shalom and conflict resolution that we see elsewhere in Scripture. Additionally, it shows many similarities with the contemporary movement called restorative justice.

This week we will look at the book of Philemon as a kind of case study. We will examine the way Paul approached an instance of conflict and crime in the Christian community, draw parallels between his actions and restorative justice, and consider ways in which this might help us become better peacemakers.

With all of this in mind, carefully and prayerfully read the whole of Paul’s letter to Philemon two or three times. If available, you may want to use a good study Bible and other Bible resources (commentary, handbook, dictionary, etc., many of which can now be found online through the Internet). Familiarize yourself with the situation in which Paul was writing.

Reflection Questions:



3. Start to think about Paul’s strategy in resolving conflict. How is it different from or similar to how your criminal justice system would address this problem? How does it compare with how you would handle conflict within Prison Fellowship?

4. Below is a definition of restorative justice. How does a restorative process, as outlined here, compare to the approach that Paul took?

“Restorative justice is a theory of justice that emphasizes repairing the harm caused or revealed by criminal behaviour. It is best accomplished through cooperative processes that include all stakeholders. Practices and programs reflecting restorative purposes will respond to crime by:

- a. identifying and taking steps to repair harm,**
- b. involving all stakeholders, and**
- c. transforming the traditional relationship between communities and their governments in responding to crime.”**

LESSON 2: The Importance of Community

Leviticus 19:17-18

¹Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, ²To Philemon our dear friend and fellow worker, to Apphia our sister, to Archippus our fellow soldier and to the church that meets in your home...

²³Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends you greetings.

²⁴And so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas and Luke, my fellow workers

Note: Although this letter is named after Philemon, one of its recipients, it is also addressed to Apphia (commonly thought to be Philemon's wife), Archippus (another leader in the church), and the whole church that met in Philemon's house. It is sent from Timothy as well as Paul, and greetings are sent from Epaphras, Mark, Aristarchus, Demas and Luke.

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Some cultures emphasize uniqueness and autonomy in the life of the individual. Other cultures emphasize the importance of life in community. Jewish and Christian cultures of the first century A.D. valued the importance of the individual. Yet they also had a strong sense of the significance of the community for personal identity, for many aspects of daily life, and for interpersonal processes. We see this understanding of community in the letter to Philemon.

Paul brings many people into his peacemaking process. Although he recognizes that the conflict is primarily between Onesimus (the offender) and Philemon (the victim), he also understands the importance of community in a successful conflict resolution process.

The community is important in conflict resolution for 3 reasons.

- 1) Often, the offender has hurt the community as well as the victim. In Onesimus' case, he betrayed the trust of the entire community, as well as having broken the law by running away and stealing from Philemon. The community, therefore, needs to see the conflict being resolved for its own sake.
- 2) Both the victim's and offender's communities have influence over the victim's and offender's response to crime or conflict. For example, Apphia will probably have great influence over whether Philemon will take Onesimus back. The fact that Epaphras, Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke send their greetings lets Philemon know that they lend their support to Onesimus and that they are in favor of successful resolution. The community can have a strong influence over whether conflict or crime is resolved.
- 3) The community to which Onesimus must return needs to know that the conflict has been resolved. Even with Philemon's acceptance, Onesimus will need the encouragement of the community of believers in Philemon's house. By addressing the letter to them as well, Paul presents Onesimus' case to them and enlists their help in accepting him back.



Reflection Questions:

Think about restorative justice's emphasis on community involvement in conflict resolution.

1. In what ways does Paul's involvement of the community in this dispute provide insights, perhaps even a model, for how we might engage the community in resolving problems and conflicts between people?

2. Do you think all conflicts should be resolved publicly? If not, which ones should and which shouldn't?

3. How could community involvement make a difference in resolving a conflict of which you are aware?

4. How can you involve the community more in your actions as a peacemaker?

LESSON 3: Empowering the Victim

Philemon 4-21

⁴I always thank my God as I remember you in my prayers, ⁵because I hear about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints. ⁶I pray that you may be active in sharing your faith, so that you will have a full understanding of every good thing we have in Christ. ⁷Your love has given me great joy and encouragement, because you, brother, have refreshed the hearts of the saints.

⁸Therefore, although in Christ I could be bold and order you to do what you ought to do, ⁹yet I appeal to you on the basis of love. I then, as Paul – an old man and now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus – ¹⁰I appeal to you for my son Onesimus,* who became my son while I was in chains. ¹¹Formerly he was useless to you, but now he has become useful both to you and to me.

¹²I am sending him – who is my very heart – back to you. ¹³I would have liked to keep him with me so that he could take your place in helping me while I am in chains for the gospel. ¹⁴But I did not want to do anything without your consent, so that any favor you do will be spontaneous and not forced. ¹⁵Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back for good – ¹⁶no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother. He is very dear to me but even dearer to you, both as a man and as a brother in the Lord.

¹⁷So if you consider me a partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. ¹⁸If he has done you any wrong or owes you anything, charge it to me. ¹⁹I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand. I will pay it back – not to mention that you owe me your very self. ²⁰I do wish, brother, that I may have some benefit from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in Christ. ²¹Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I ask.

*Onesimus means useful.

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Robust and effective peacemaking will, to the extent possible, include all the relevant parties in a dispute, conflict, or crime. We have seen in the previous lesson how the community should and can be brought into the peacemaking process. The aggrieved person or victim should also be vitally and respectfully integrated into any peacemaking initiative.

However, in criminal justice the needs of victims are often lost sight of because of the system’s focus on offenders. Additionally, friends and relatives of victims often feel uncomfortable around them and do not know how to respond. They do not know what to say or how to help. Some people cope by trying to find some fault with victims’ behavior or by making victims feel that they should just move on with their lives. For this reason, victims can come to feel alienated even from friends and family members around them. They feel that they will be stigmatized if they cannot “get over it” and become like they were before the crime took place. The entire situation – from the act of crime through

Reflection Questions:



1. Looking closely at today’s passage, can you identify specific ways in which Paul leads Philemon to a position of responsible control and decision-making in the conflict over Onesimus? What can we learn from Paul about how to deal well with people who have been aggrieved or victimized?

2. Can you think of any other Bible passages that talk about empowering victims?

LESSON 4: Restoring the Offender

Philemon 10-19

¹⁰I appeal to you for my son Onesimus,* who became my son while I was in chains. ¹¹Formerly he was useless to you, but now he has become useful both to you and to me.

¹²I am sending him—who is my very heart—back to you. ¹³I would have liked to keep him with me so that he could take your place in helping me while I am in chains for the gospel. ¹⁴But I did not want to do anything without your consent, so that any favor you do will be spontaneous and not forced. ¹⁵Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back for good – ¹⁶no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother. He is very dear to me but even dearer to you, both as a man and as a brother in the Lord.

¹⁷So if you consider me a partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. ¹⁸If he has done you any wrong or owes you anything, charge it to me. ¹⁹I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand. I will pay it back – not to mention that you owe me your very self.

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If, as we have seen, communities and victims are integral to any process of peacemaking when there is a conflict or crime, certainly offenders must be properly included as well. This is not to say offenders should be the center or focus of the process, as too often is the case in the criminal justice system, to the detriment of proper attention to and inclusion of communities and victims. It is to say there should be good and right ways to deal with offenders and bring them into the process to the improvement of all relevant parties, including offenders themselves.

In most criminal justice processes, offenders are defined by their offenses and seen as useless. It is clear, however, that Onesimus' crime is seen as only a small part of who he is. Paul acknowledges Onesimus' wrongdoing and is careful to make sure that Philemon receives recompense for his injuries (v. 18). Yet Paul's focus is on Onesimus as a beloved son and brother. He emphasizes the fact that Onesimus now has a purpose in life much more significant than that of a slave (vv. 15-16).

All offenders need to understand their dual identity: as someone who has committed a crime and must, therefore, be held responsible for it; but also as someone who has an identity as a person who is loved by God and has a purpose in life beyond paying the price for his or her crime.

Reflection Questions:



1. Looking carefully at this passage, can you identify specific ways in which Paul acknowledges Onesimus' responsibility as well as his personhood beyond the wrongdoing? How hard must this be to do, especially while also trying to acknowledge the injury to Philemon?

2. Can you think of Biblical examples of God looking beyond the criminal identity of offenders to the person he created them to be?

3. Do you know any offenders who have been defined by your community primarily by their offenses?

4. How can you help them and others to understand their identity in Christ?

LESSON 5: Healing Wounds

Philemon 8-19

⁸Therefore, although in Christ I could be bold and order you to do what you ought to do, ⁹yet I appeal to you on the basis of love. I then, as Paul – an old man and now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus – ¹⁰I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, who became my son while I was in chains. ¹¹Formerly he was useless to you, but now he has become useful both to you and to me.

¹²I am sending him – who is my very heart – back to you. ¹³I would have liked to keep him with me so that he could take your place in helping me while I am in chains for the gospel. ¹⁴But I did not want to do anything without your consent, so that any favor you do will be spontaneous and not forced. ¹⁵Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back for good – ¹⁶no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother. He is very dear to me but even dearer to you, both as a man and as a brother in the Lord.

¹⁷So if you consider me a partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. ¹⁸If he has done you any wrong or owes you anything, charge it to me. ¹⁹I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand. I will pay it back – not to mention that you owe me your very self.

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Through our study to this point, we have looked at some key components of effective peacemaking: the importance of community; empowering victims; and restoring offenders. The aim of true peacemaking goes even further in ending the conflict and righting the wrong. Conflict resolution at its best and fullest leads to healing. Restorative justice emphasizes that, in order for a conflict to be fully resolved, the wounds inflicted in that conflict must be healed.

In this letter, we see that Paul has prepared everyone for their eventual meeting, but he knows this in itself will not fully resolve the conflict. Paul desires genuine, lasting reconciliation between Philemon, Onesimus, and the community. He wants the injuries and the relationships to be made healthy and whole again.

We see Paul paving the way for this healing of wounds in the way he treats all parties with gentle persuasion. His love for Philemon, Onesimus, and the community is obvious in his writing. His respectful treatment of all set an example for the others to follow. His recognition of harm done and his willingness to repair that harm showed a concern that Philemon's material hurts be healed. Finally, his focus on each individual's identity in the Lord and Christian community prepared the way for their community to grow back together with Onesimus as a healthy part of it.

Reflection Questions:



1. What do you think may have happened when Onesimus, Philemon, and the church met?

2. How might the respectful treatment of individuals, reparation of harm done, and successful reintegration of parties have contributed to healing in the meeting between Onesimus, Philemon, and then church?

3. What lessons can you draw from Paul's efforts as a peacemaker as you consider how to be a peacemaker yourself?
