

Life often presents us with situations that demand significant risks. “No risk, no reward” seems to hold true in every aspect of life, including our relationships. We may face conflicts where old wounds resurface, and forgiveness feels costly. Onesimus, a runaway servant, found himself in such a situation. He had wronged his master, Philemon, and fled, leaving a broken relationship in his wake. Now Paul was attempting to restore their relationship. But for this to happen, everyone involved would need to embrace risks.

- *Onesimus took a risk by going back. What if Philemon decided to imprison him? What if he demanded repayment for all his losses? How could Onesimus ever come up with the money?*
- *Paul also took a risk in getting involved. He could have jeopardized his relationship with Philemon or the church at Colossae, who were part of his financial support. When Paul offered to repay any debt with his own hand, he essentially wrote a promissory note. Philemon could have called in that debt, and if Onesimus had lied about what he owed, Paul would bear the cost. It was a risk.*
- *Finally, Paul was asking Philemon to take a risk. Onesimus had given him good reason not to trust him. What if Philemon welcomed him back? Would the other servants see him as a pushover? What if Onesimus ran off again, costing Philemon even more time and perhaps stealing from him again?*

Have you noticed that when we ask these “what if” questions, they’re almost always negative? But we all know that our conflicts rarely work out as badly as we imagine. We never consider what might happen if things go well. What if Philemon did forgive Onesimus? What if the servant returned and became a valued member of Philemon’s household? What if this example of grace transformed both their lives and the wider Christian community?

Relationships are inherently risky. Restoring a relationship is even riskier. So why risk it? Why not just discard the old relationship and start fresh? In my ministry, I have often worked with couples who see an exit as an easier alternative to reconciliation. Some have significant issues to work through, and I know firsthand that there are no easy answers. But Robert Frost was right when he wrote, “The best way out is always through.” I often tell couples considering divorce that there’s no easy way out. You must go through. You will either endure the hardship of reconciliation or face the hardship of divorce. God makes His thoughts on divorce clear in Scripture. He knows it leads to harm and prefers reconciliation if at all possible. In any conflict, fleeing will almost always seem easier than fighting for the relationship. But as Christians, we have three gospel-centered reasons to do everything we can to make peace. This is why Paul challenged the church in Rome: “If possible, so far as it depends on you, live

peaceably with all” (Romans 12:18).

- *Because of what Jesus did for us. In spite of our imperfections, God did not throw us away. He never tossed us aside, even in our brokenness. In Jeremiah 18, the prophet recounts a scene of a potter working with a marred clump of clay. Instead of discarding the clay, he removes the defective part and reshapes it into something brand new. Just like the potter who won’t abandon his work, God continues molding us, taking the cracked pieces of our lives and filling them with His grace.*
- *Because of what Jesus can do for them. God has the power to change people from the inside out, transforming even the most broken lives. Look at the Apostle Paul’s story. He started as Saul, a fierce persecutor of Christians, even overseeing the killing of Stephen. But God intervened, knocking him to the ground on the road to Damascus, and gave him a new purpose and a new name. Saul the oppressor became Paul the preacher, a leader in spreading the gospel. In the same way, God’s Spirit works in us, reshaping our hearts and minds, sometimes through small steps and other times through dramatic shifts. As Paul himself wrote, “If anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!” (2 Corinthians 5:17). God has the power not only to forgive our past but to give us a new future.*
- *Because of what Jesus might do through them. When Naomi lost her husband and sons, she urged her daughters-in-law to return to their families. But Ruth chose to stay with her, saying, “Where you go, I will go, and where you stay, I will stay” (Ruth 1:16). Ruth sacrificed her comfort to help Naomi, accompanying her to Bethlehem and working in the fields to provide for them both. Later, this act of kindness was returned. Naomi provided counsel to Ruth that resulted in her marriage to Boaz. Ruth’s kindness to Naomi came full circle, as God provided for them both, giving Ruth a new family and blessing Naomi with a grandson who would be part of the lineage of King David—and ultimately, Jesus. When we step out to show grace to others, God often brings that blessing back to us in ways we could never anticipate.*

At the end of his letter, Paul drops in a subtle reminder of the value of unity over security:

“Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends greetings to you, and so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke, my fellow workers” (Philemon 1:23–24).

Epaphras, who planted the church in Philemon’s home, is with Paul in prison. Then, Paul sends greetings from Mark, a reminder of a once-broken relationship that was fully restored. Mark had left Paul and Barnabas during a missionary journey (Acts 13:13), leading to a severe disagreement (Acts 15:36–40). But over time, Mark grew in his faith, and Paul grew in grace. By the end of his life, Paul would call Mark “very useful to me for ministry” (2 Timothy 4:11). Mark’s story shows how, in Christ, frac-

tured relationships can heal and grow stronger than before.

People are difficult but not disposable. They have value. I know that sounds shallow and cliché. Of course they have value! But listen, let me explain why they have value. I can, right here this morning tell you what anything is worth. I don't even need to know anything about your industry. It, whatever it is, is worth what someone is willing to pay for it.

It might be beneficial for us to pause and consider, what did God pay for those who frustrate or wound us? What are they worth? As much as God was willing to pay for them. People are difficult but not disposable.

Let's consider the rest of Onesimus's story. Tradition holds that after his reconciliation with Philemon, Onesimus not only gained freedom but also grew into a leader in the early church. Ignatius of Antioch, writing around A.D. 110, addressed a letter to the Ephesians in which he mentions a bishop named Onesimus, praising his faith and leadership (Letter to the Ephesians 1:3). Many scholars believe this could be the same Onesimus, once a runaway servant, now a bishop in Ephesus.

Onesimus's transformation from servant to church leader reflects the extraordinary power of God's grace. Reconciliation and redemption are at the heart of the gospel. When we take the risk to forgive and reconcile, as Philemon did, or to seek restoration, as Onesimus did, we open the door to God's healing power. Imagine the impact if we embraced this same risk in our own relationships.

Part 5: "Unity" over "Security"

a study of Philemon

RUNAWAY grace

God's Plan for Broken Relationships