

MENDING BROKEN RELATIONSHIPS

Today's Text: Philemon

Extracts:

Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, ... to Philemon our beloved friend and fellow labourer... Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. I thank my God, making mention of you always in my prayers, *hearing of your love and faith which you have toward the Lord Jesus and toward all the saints, that the sharing of your faith may become effective by the acknowledgement of every good thing which is in you in Christ Jesus...* Therefore, though I might be very bold in Christ to command you what is fitting, yet for love's sake I rather appeal to you-being such a one as Paul, the aged, and now also a prisoner of Jesus Christ- *I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, whom I have begotten while in my chains, who once was unprofitable to you, but now is profitable to you and me. I am sending him back. You therefore receive him ... no longer as a slave but [as]... a beloved brother... both in the flesh and in the Lord [Philem. 1-16]*

Billy Ray Harris, 55, had not seen his family members in 16 years.¹ They took him for dead but he missed them very badly. For survival, he had had to beg for alms in Kansas City, Missouri, USA. One day, a passerby mistakenly dropped her engagement ring in Ray's cup. On discovering it at the end of the day, Ray took it to a jeweller who offered him \$4,000 on the spot. Ray was tempted but he decided to keep the ring and wait for the owner. A few days later, the owner, Sarah Darling, showed up and was thrilled to get her ring back. She told the story (with a picture) online and it went viral. She launched a donation fund to help Ray get back the \$4,000 he had rejected from the jeweller. Ray's baby-sister, living 490 miles away in Texas, stumbled on the story and alerted family members that Ray was alive. They soon traced where he was and reunited. With a part-time job and a warm bed, Ray put an arm around his baby-sister and beamed, "Got it all right here now!" Even much more, donations poured in to the tune of \$183,000.

How wonderful it can be to mend broken relationships-with family, friends, associates, etc. Sometimes, we get lucky. Other times, it looks impossible. In today's Bible verses, Paul mends the broken relationships between a runaway servant (slave) and his master. What lessons can we learn from that story? Let's find out.

¹ Story is based on Jillian Eugenios, "Reunited with family, homeless man who returned ring says he's 'got it all'", *TODAY*, 24 March 2013; http://www.today.com/id/51240194/ns/today-good_news/t/reunited-family-homeless-man-who-returned-ring-says-hes-got-it-all/#.UU8nkhw3vzj

1. Background: From a run-away slave to a brother-in-Christ

Imagine yourself at the reception to mark the inauguration of Joseph as the new governor of Egypt. The noise from Pharaoh's palace was loud. Joseph, that Hebrew slave that Potiphar had put in jail on his wife's framed-up charge that he had attempted to rape her, had just been made governor "over all the land of Egypt." The Egyptian king had said of Joseph, "You shall be over my house, and ***all my people shall be ruled according to your word; only in regard to the throne will I be greater than you.***" With a signet ring on Joseph's hand and a gold chain around his neck, guards paraded him on the streets in the king's second chariot, crying, "Bow the knee!" [Gen. 41: 40-43]. If you were in Mrs. Potiphar's situation, what would you do? She could not refuse to meet Joseph but how would she face him after what had happened?

That should give you an idea of how people can feel when they face broken relationships. It could be between a husband and his wife after decades of blissful marriage. It could be parents who feel ignored and neglected by their children after they had married and moved out. It could be church and political party members who feel used and betrayed by their leaders after helping them to succeed. On one side, there are very bitter feelings of hurt, betrayal and more. Some will swear, "Never again!" They expect apologies and appreciation. Yet, the "offending" parties may not see why they should apologise for their "righteous indignation"! They had had enough of "abuse" and "misuse" and it was time to move on. In some cases, as in Mrs. Potiphar's case, there was a painful lie against an innocent man. ***Time may heal the wounds but the scars remain as a sad reminder on both sides!***

Here are a few dilemmas you may face, no matter how you feel about the broken relationship:

- According to a Nigerian proverb, ***the accuser may not necessarily always win the case. In other words, that you are the offended party does not make your case stronger; that you are the offending party does not make your case weaker!*** For example, after the death of King Solomon, Jeroboam, his servant led a revolt against his son, Rehoboam, and broke the kingdom of Israel into two- the bigger chunk going to the rebel. The new king raised an army of 180,000 soldiers to quell the rebellion. But the word of God came for the king through Shemaiah, a prophet, saying, "You shall not go up or fight against your brethren... Let every man return to his house, for this thing is from Me" [1 Kgs 12: 1-24]. So, ***how do you know if the broken relationship you are dealing with is not a spiritual matter?***
- We know from the Scriptures that God does not forgive anybody who has not repented or asked for forgiveness [Gen. 3: 12-24]. Yet, God requires us to forgive every offence against us [Lk 11: 4]. What does that mean? It suggests that ***you cannot play prosecutor, jury and judge in your own case against others!*** For example, you have no right to mete out judgment

on a burglar caught in your house. You hand him over to the police and the judicial system. So, you are to ***play your role and let God take care of His own.***

- God has said, “Vengeance is Mine, I will repay” [Deut. 32: 35; Rom. 12: 19]. That suggests that you should leave God to deal with the other party if s(he) refuses to play by God’s rules. ***The party that defaults exposes self to God’s judgment.*** Isn’t that worse?

So, no matter our side of the divide, the word of God requires us to behave like true believers who are to love without hypocrisy, bless those who persecute us and live peaceably with all; to overcome evil with good [Rom. 12: 9-21]. So, mending broken relationships is critical to our claim to being God-led in all that we do here on earth. That is the big challenge for all of us. How can we mend broken relationships facing us right now God’s way?

Paul’s letter to Philemon becomes quite handy in answering that question. It was addressed specifically to Philemon, a “beloved friend and fellow labourer” and to the church in his house [Philem. 1-2]. That suggests that Philemon was a prominent person in his part of the world. The letter was written on behalf of Onesimus, a runaway slave of Philemon’s, that Paul wanted to reconcile with his estranged master [10]. Under the Law of Moses, “If you buy a Hebrew servant, he shall serve six years, and in the seventh he shall go out free and pay nothing” [Ex. 21: 2]. For Onesimus to be called a runaway slave suggests that he had broken his service and was, therefore, still legally bound to his master, Philemon. To go back on his own would be hard or impossible without facing harsh reprisals. So, Paul decided to play the role of a mediator/intermediary. Let us pay attention to the following principles that can be discerned from his intervention:

- a) *The offending party was now a changed man, having accepted Jesus*

Paul wrote, “I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, whom I have begotten while in my chains, who was once unprofitable to you, but now is profitable to you and to me” [Philem. 10-11]. Elsewhere, when Paul sent his epistle to the Colossians, he delivered it through Tychicus, “a beloved brother, faithful minister, and a fellow servant in the Lord” in the company of Onesimus, “a faithful and beloved brother” [Col. 4: 7,9]. Therefore, ***the runaway slave had given his life to Christ. He had become a changed man.***

- b) *The offended party had also changed!*

Paul earlier made mention of what he had heard about ***Philemon’s “love and faith*** [which he had] ***toward the Lord Jesus and toward all the saints***, that the sharing of [his] faith may become effective by the acknowledgement of every good thing which [was in him] in Christ Jesus” [Philem. 5-6]. That suggests that Philemon was no longer the kind of

master whose “wicked” attitude could have pushed Onesimus to run away some years back. He had himself become a man of God who was likely to be forgiving and patient for love “bears all things, believes all things, endures all things” [1 Cor. 13: 7].

A major reason for that change is when the offended party comes to realise that what was meant to hurt him/her was actually for good, as in Joseph’s case. If he had not been sold into slavery in Egypt by his brothers and put in jail on false charges where he met Pharaoh’s butler, he might never have become the governor of Egypt. I remember the case of a close friend of mine during the 1980’s who was denied a well-deserved promotion to the position of Senior Lecturer in one of Nigeria’s top universities. A few months later, he responded to a job advert in the private sector. He got the job and, within two months, he was given a brand new official car with an official driver. The first thing he did was to drive to the university campus to thank the Dean of the Faculty for denying him the promotion! My friend no longer felt offended but realised that those that had stopped him were actually God’s means of pushing him into his “Promised Land.”.

c) *Paul becomes a trusted intermediary to lead Onesimus back to his master*

Paul would have loved to keep Onesimus for himself but he did not have the legal authority to do so. He was, therefore, returning him to his rightful master, Philemon. Examine Paul’s choice of words [**Philem. 12-16**]:

*I am sending him back. You therefore **receive him**, that is, **my own heart, whom I wished to keep with me**, that on your behalf he might minister to me in my chains for the gospel. But **without your consent I wanted to do nothing, that your deed might not be by compulsion, as it were, but voluntary**. For perhaps he departed for a while for this purpose, **that you might receive him forever, no longer as a slave but ... [as] a beloved brother... both in the flesh and in the Lord.***

Paul placed emphasis on assuaging Philemon’s hurt feelings and appealing to his higher spiritual qualities. Paul added, “If then you count me as a partner, receive him as you would me. But if he has wronged you or owes you anything, put that on my account” [vv. 17-18]. **He encouraged the offended party to accept a restored relationship, not because of the trusted intermediary’s words but because it was the right thing to do for God’s sake.** He was talking to the converted!

We may not be as lucky as Onesimus to have a great man like Paul to help us to mend our broken relationships with a man of God like Philemon who even had a

church in his house. Nevertheless, there is a great deal that we can learn from that story.

2. Lessons for mending our strained relationships with others

Here are some lessons that we can apply to deal with our own strained relationships with others:

a) *Swallow your pride and accept full responsibility for your share of past mistakes*

Most times, we want our own choices to produce better results so that we can beat our chests and say, “I told you so!” We like to hear the other party doing worse and worse without us. In reality, no one can say how things will turn out in the end because only God knows what is going on and how things will turn out. For example, Potiphar’s wife might have felt great when innocent Joseph languished in Pharaoh’s jail for years. But in the end, it was Joseph that laughed last. We have no record of how Joseph received General & Mrs. Potiphar during the cocktail party that followed his inauguration as Governor of Egypt. However, from the way he received his brothers that had sold him into slavery, he could have said to that couple, “Do not be afraid, for am I in the place of God?... You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good” [Gen. 50: 19-20]. So, the first important lesson is to ***swallow your pride and accept full responsibility for your share of past mistakes.***

Take the case of the prodigal son. We know that “a testament is in force after men are dead, since it has no power at all while the testator is alive” [Heb. 9: 17]. By asking his father to give him his share of his estate, the prodigal son was actually wishing his father dead! Nevertheless, his father granted his request and he left home only to squander his new-found wealth on prodigal living. As he suffered, he came to his senses and repented. He decided to swallow his pride and go back home to his father and say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you, and I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me like one of your hired servants.” When he made that turn, it was his father who ran forward to embrace his returning son [Lk 15: 11-24].

Nobody is above mistakes. However, it takes humility to admit our faults. That is why we all need to fear God and obey His will at all times. In the words of Jesus, “Why do you call Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ and not do the things which I say?” [Lk 6: 46].

b) *Get a trusted mediator if you can't go back on your own*

If you find it too hard or too “humiliating” to seek reconciliation on your own, you can use a trusted mediator who is also respected by the offended party. His/her mandate is to **reconcile** (settle the disagreement) **and** **restitute** (restore the broken relationship). That means that the relationship will return and even be better than before the breach.

Take the example of the dispute among the children of Israel after Joshua had brought them to the Promised Land. The descendants of Reuben, Gad and half the tribe of Manasseh were given land on one side of the Jordan while the rest were to live on the other side of the river. Since the altar was at Shiloh, the two-and-a-half tribes built an altar by the Jordan as a memorial to the one in Shiloh. Then, somebody sneaked out to tell the bigger group of a rebellious act! They gathered at Shiloh to go to war against their fewer brethren! However, somebody suggested to first send some elders led by Phinehas, the priest, to find out the truth of the matter. He went over to the two-and-a-half-tribes with the question, “What treachery is this that you have committed against the God of Israel... that you have built for yourselves an altar, that you might rebel this day against the LORD?” They explained that it was not for worship or sacrifice but as a monument for future generations to know that they were an integral part of Israel. The explanation so pleased everybody when Phinehas carried back the report that “they blessed God [and] spoke no more of going against them in battle.” They allowed the altar and called it “Witness” [Joshua 22: 10-34].

Indeed, only the truth can set both parties free. That is why you must take steps to stop those pretending to be on your side (by reinforcing your intransigence) whereas they are actually out to “destroy” you (out of envy). Use truth-tellers that both parties can trust, if necessary, and mend your broken relationships sooner than later. That is Paul’s message for us in today’s study.

3. Conclusion: Jesus is our Mediator before His Father!

God gave us the best economy man can think of in the Garden of Eden. He also gave us the free will to use the place well. However, man chose to disobey by eating the forbidden fruit. Instead of confessing and asking for forgiveness, man shifted blame—from husband to wife and wife to the devil! As a result, man was thrown out and became subject to physical death and hell. But, God in His infinite mercy sent His only begotten Son, **Jesus Christ**, to die on the cross in our place, and by His stripes, we have been healed. Now, He **is our Mediator with the Father, helping to mend our broken relationships with Him** [Jn 3: 16-17; Heb. 12: 24].

Can you refuse such a precious offer? Time is running out. Today, this moment, accept Jesus as your Lord and Saviour. Then, He will take you to His Father, and you will become sons of God. Welcome back home!