

RECONCILIATION

Life Group Leaders Guide

Directions

This packet contains the background information, series information, and weekly curriculum you will need to lead a life group for our stand alone message on *Racial Reconciliation*. Everything on this page is to help you stay connected to the series as a whole. Behind this page is the individual curriculum to help you point people to Jesus. The *Purpose* and *Move* sections of the curriculum are for the leader to read or paraphrase to the group. The *Notes and Commentary* section is for the leader to get background information and go deeper into the passages before leading the life group. The curriculum was designed with your freedom in mind. Read through the curriculum and decide what will work best for your group. SOAP the passages with the group, use only certain questions, write your own questions, or use the curriculum verbatim. As the leader, you know what will point your people to Jesus.

Message Overview

A person would have to be “living under a rock” to not see that our country is still dealing with racial issues and tension. This Sunday we saw that not only are these issues still prevalent but the bible speaks to racial issues and challenges all Christians to allow Jesus to make us all one. The gospel (good news) is not limited to personal salvation, but includes the reconciliation of people to God, and to each other. In the sermon, our pastors attempted to, at minimum, raise awareness of the issues of race, racism, inequality, and prejudice. Also, our pastors suggested ways to change personally and as a church to be more united with those different from ourselves.

Life Group Overview

During the *Racial Reconciliation* stand alone message our life group curriculum will cover almost the same topic that was covered from stage but using a different passage or set of passages. While the Sunday message was on racial reconciliation, the life group curriculum will focus on reconciliation in general. With that said, we do not want to deny our people the healthy process of verbalizing about the weekend message and this very controversial topic so the life group curriculum will begin with an unpacking of the previous Sunday’s service.

Racial Reconciliation Message Schedule

Week	Sermon Date	Topic of sermon	Topic of life group
Week 1	1/28	Racial Reconciliation - Ephesians 2:11-14 & 2 Corinthians 5:18-19	Reconciliation - Philemon 8-21

The Point Church Life Group Curriculum

Reconciliation - Philemon 8-21

Purpose of Study

What does it look like to reconcile with people who have hurt you or you have hurt? What does it look like to not allow differences and personal history to divide us but to move towards one another in love and mercy? What does it look like to be a 3rd party to a relationship in need of reconciliation? Those questions will be addressed in this life group study. The purpose of this study is the same for us as it was for Paul when he wrote this letter: to bring people, especially Christians, together even through tension and difficult situations.

Flow of Study

Optional Icebreaker: When you think of race issues in America, what comes to mind?

Move #1: Since the Sunday sermon covered such an important topic, begin the study by allowing your people to unpack their thinking about racial reconciliation by using the following questions that are tied to the weekend message. After this move, the curriculum will switch to reconciliation in general.

1. Did anything stand out to you from the message this weekend?
2. In what ways did the message this weekend challenge you?
3. It is 2018, don't you think we should have overcome racial issues by now? Why do you think this remains an issue in America?
4. The Next Step from this weekend was to D.I.F.F.U.S.E. (acronym seen below) the problem. What do you think would be different in our relationships if we used this acronym? Do you think we can apply this to others areas of life besides racial reconciliation?
 - a. D- Define the problem (Proverbs 15:14)
 - b. I- Initiate time to talk (Matthew 5:23-24)
 - c. F- Focus on the problem (Proverbs 18:19)
 - d. F- Feel their pain (Proverbs 17:7)
 - e. U- Uncover the root problem (Proverbs 21:2)
 - f. S- Set things right (James 5:16)
 - g. E- Establish a game plan (James 1:22-24)

Move #2: In this study we will be studying a book in the bible that is not commonly referenced or read titled Philemon (pronounced *fuh-LEE-muhn*). This book is a great tool for reconciliation and what that should look like for the Christian. The book itself is incredibly short and can be cryptic if someone does not understand the background of the story. For instance, commentator David Garland says "reading Philemon is like coming to a movie in the middle, having to catch up on characters and plot, and then leaving before it is over." Before we begin our study, let's make sure that we understand the background and what parts of the story we have missed.

Background: There are three main figures in the book of Philemon. There is Philemon (a wealthy Christian with many servants who was a prominent figure in his church), Onesimus (a former servant of Philemon's who

was converted by the Apostle Paul and is currently residing with him), and the Apostle Paul. What we do know about the book is that something has occurred to cause tension between Philemon and Onesimus. Onesimus is currently with Paul but Paul intends to send him back to Philemon. Before Paul sends Onesimus back, he is writing a letter to Philemon begging for him to aid in the process of reconciliation. What we do not know is what exactly happened between the two men. Many commentators think that Onesimus ran away from Philemon (either for freedom, because of some sort of mistreatment, or because he has stolen from Philemon) and either ran to the Apostle Paul or just happened to cross his paths where he was later converted. While not knowing exactly what occurred between the two men does make our study of the book muddy, the outcome that Paul wants in the situation is crystal clear. That outcome is what we will be looking through tonight and then we will take some time to apply it to our own relationships.

Move #2 (continued): We are going to break up Paul's main writing to Philemon into two chunks. The first will be about Paul's intention for Onesimus to return to Philemon. The second half will focus on what Paul asks Philemon to do and it will be covered in **Move #3**.

Read Philemon 8-16 (NIV)

⁸ Therefore, although in Christ I could be bold and order you to do what you ought to do, ⁹ yet I prefer to appeal to you on the basis of love. It is as none other than Paul—an old man and now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus— ¹⁰ that I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, who became my son while I was in chains. ¹¹ Formerly he was useless to you, but now he has become useful both to you and to me.

¹² I am sending him—who is my very heart—back to you. ¹³ I 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. ¹⁴ But I did not want to do anything without your consent, so that any favor you do would not seem forced but would be voluntary. ¹⁵ Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back forever— ¹⁶ no 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 fellow man and as a brother in the Lord.

1. What stands out to you from this part of the passage?
2. Reread Paul's words in verse 8-9. What would be a good take away from these words for someone who is a 3rd party to a relationship that needs reconciliation?
3. In verse 10 Paul refers to Onesimus as "my son." In verse 12 Paul refers to Onesimus as "my very heart." What does that terminology show about Paul and Onesimus? If you were Philemon reading that phrase, how would you see it affecting you?
4. One reason Paul uses loving language about Onesimus is because he knew that Philemon would have a tendency to label Onesimus by wrongs he had committed instead of as a beloved brother. Have you ever had this tendency (to label those who have hurt you by the wrong they have committed instead of a person made in the image of God)? What are ways to combat against this tendency?
5. In verses 15 and 16 Paul makes a crazy assumption. That maybe the reason all this happened was so that Philemon and Onesimus would have a much deeper relationship. Have you seen this sort of reconciliation in your own life (where after reconciling, the relationship is deeper and healthier than it was before)?

6. Paul is very clear to make a distinction that Onesimus is no longer just a slave of Philemon but he is now a Christian. In your opinion, does someone being a brother or sister in Christ change the importance of reconciliation?

Move #3: Now let's go to the second half of Paul's appeal and see exactly what he wants Philemon to do.

Read Philemon 17-21 (NIV)

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

1. What stands out to you from this part of the passage?
2. Philemon was most likely converted by Paul when he started the church in Ephesus. The church now most likely meets in Philemon's house. Knowing that background, how do you think Philemon would welcome Paul when Paul comes to town? What would it be like for him to give that same welcome to a person who has hurt him (Onesimus)?
3. On Sunday we learned that the reconciliation means **to put back together by doing away with whatever broke it apart**. Is this the same thing that Paul is asking Philemon to do?
4. In this time period, servants and slaves were viewed as property and less than non-slaves. In what ways does this elevate what Paul urged Philemon to do?
 - a. **Note to the leader:** *A captured runaway in the first century could expect to receive anything from a brutal flogging to branding, from being sold to work on a farm to being sold to work in the galleys or mines, from crucifixion to being thrown to the wild beasts in the arena (Garland). Also, it is believed by some commentators that Paul was not just urging for reconciliation but for Onesimus to be freed from slavery. Paul was clearly urging Philemon to go above and beyond what was culturally expected.*
5. Reread Paul's words in verses 17-21. Could you ever see yourself making a request like this to a person in your life that needs to reconcile with another?
6. Although bold, the request in verses 17-21 helps us see that relationships in need of reconciliation do not involve just two people, instead often others are deeply affected by it. Have you witnessed this in your life?
7. If there is a relationship in your life that needs reconciliation, do you think others are being hurt by it? Could this be a motivator for you to do something about it?
8. Are you a 3rd party to a relationship that is in need of reconciliation? What is that like?

Move #4: We now know what Paul WANTS for these two brothers but we do not have any insight in scripture on how, or if, the situation is resolved. Even though the end of the story is incomplete, we can still apply Paul's direction to our own lives and relationships.

1. Throughout our discussion tonight has any person or situation come to your mind that we can pray for?
2. Relationships are difficult and hard to put in a simple reconciliation equation. How would a person know when reconciliation is needed between them and someone else?
3. Do you think it is possible to have relationships where reconciliation is not the correct option?
4. Much like the story from tonight, in many relationships there is not exactly a debt that can be easily repaid (ex: if someone steals from you they can return the stolen item but they cannot easily return your safety or trust that they also stole in the process?). With that in mind, how do we completely move past the issue towards full reconciliation?
5. The book of Philemon can also be used as a tool for someone who is a 3rd party to a relationship that needs reconciliation. What did Paul do in this letter that would be good for a person to mimic if they find themselves as the 3rd party to a broken relationship?

Next Steps: The following is something you could challenge your members to do in order to take what you studied in this curriculum farther.

1. Send out *Uncovering Treasures in Paul's Shortest Letter* by Justin Taylor from The Gospel Coalition to your group at some point this week and challenge them to use it to go deeper into Philemon (article linked below and also in the *Notes and Commentary* section)
 - a. <https://goo.gl/w31c13>

Prayer: End your study with a time of prayer where people can share prayer requests and be prayed for before they leave. If possible, please steer some prayer towards what your group talked about during this study.

Notes and Commentary

The following are pieces of commentary, facts, and links based on the passages of this study in order. Use them to help supplement your group time or for your personal preparation.

- If you are looking for an easy to read unpacking of the book of Philemon we suggest *Uncovering Treasures in Paul's Shortest Letter* by Justin Taylor from The Gospel Coalition. It also has some great insights into the characters of Mark and Demas which could be great for your more thirsty group members.
 - Link to article → <https://goo.gl/w31c13>
- **(on verse 9)** Many have noted how reticent Paul is in this letter, only dropping hints here and there about what he wants his friend to do. Verse 9 explains why. He wants his friend to do what is right but will not command, because he wants Philemon to draw his own conclusions and to make his own decision about what is fitting in Christ to do. (Garland)
- **(on slavery and freeing Onesimus)** Philemon's culture had conditioned him to view slaves as less than full persons who were deservedly consigned to their lot by fate, and Philemon would have been expected to exact revenge on one who stole away. But what was culturally permissible for dealing with

a runaway slave was at odds with what is fitting in Christ. A captured runaway in the first century could expect to receive anything from a brutal flogging to branding, from being sold to work on a farm to being sold to work in the galleys or mines, from crucifixion to being thrown to the wild beasts in the arena. He might also be compelled to wear an iron collar engraved with the name and address of the owner and the command “Catch me for I have fled my master.” Forgiveness was not the norm in Philemon’s world, but it is a fundamental requirement for Christians (Matt. 6:14–15; 18:21–22). Paul makes that clear in Colossians 3:12–14, where he tells them that God’s chosen people are to be clothed with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience, and to be as forgiving as the Lord. Paul seeks to activate Philemon’s Christian consciousness to make him aware of what is required for him to do in this situation, and his request puts flesh and bones on the abstract ethical exhortation to have compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. He expects Philemon, as a Christian who has been renewed in the image of his Creator (Col. 3:10), to show love and to forgive his grievance against Onesimus, just as the Lord forgave him his sins. (Garland)

- **(on the difficulty for Onesimus to return home)** What is frequently overlooked is that Paul also expects Onesimus to act from love. Paul sends him home with a ringing endorsement, but he has no guarantee that Philemon will honor it. Onesimus must be willing to accept with grace whatever Philemon might decide in his case, which could include severe punishment or being sold to another master. Like the prodigal son returning home, he can only cast himself on the mercy of his master. He has now become his brother in Christ, but he surely knows that brothers do not always act with love toward one another. Paul makes his request with confidence because of Philemon’s previous demonstration of a loving spirit (vv. 5, 7), but Onesimus cannot expect an impartial arbitrator to intervene decisively for him. He returns because of love and hopes that he will be received in love. (Garland)
- **(on verse 11)** Paul then eases the tense situation further with a play on the name of Onesimus, which means “useful” in Greek. Slaves bore the names that either slave dealers gave them to extol their wares or that their masters gave them to express their hopes. “Formerly he was useless to you, but now he has become useful both to you and to me” (v. 11) contains a wordplay that can be found in other writers, but it becomes more poignant and memorable in this situation. (Garland)
- **(on verse 11)** Paul takes the wordplay to still another level. The word *achrestos* (“useless”) and *achristos* (“Christless”) would have been pronounced exactly the same. Onesimus was not useful before because he was without Christ! When he became a Christian, however, he became useful, *euchrestos*. Onesimus was not useful before because he was without Christ. But now that he is in Christ, he has become truly Onesimus, useful. Philemon’s slave returns as the slave of Christ, having found his true identity. (Garland)
- **(on verse 16)** Receiving him “no longer as a slave” (v. 16) is therefore a subtle but open invitation to free Onesimus. One can take it literally: “Since he has become a beloved brother, he should no longer be your slave.” Paul, however, cannot bluntly ask this since it presents Philemon with a ticklish, practical dilemma. Almost everyone would have considered it absurd to manumit a runaway slave immediately upon his return with a letter from Paul. Such an action would have two effects: It would seriously diminish Philemon’s reputation among other slave owners in a society where reputation was important; furthermore, it would also have a negative impact on any other slaves in his household. The carrot-and-stick approach that governed slave relations would be dealt a serious blow. Manumission would no longer be a reward for years of hard work but a prize for running away. (Garland)

- **(on freeing Onesimus)** If it were explained that Onesimus was freed because he had become a Christian, other slaves would soon feign conversion. What if some of his other slaves were already Christians? Would they not expect the same treatment? Barclay concludes that the social situation was so complex that Paul deliberately left things open-ended, leaving the decision entirely to Philemon because Paul did not know what to advise. Barclay helps us see how radical a request for Onesimus' freedom would be and how costly it would be for Philemon. The decision must be Philemon's, but Paul does not leave him clueless about what he should do. (Garland)

- **(on verse 21)** Paul does not explicitly ask Philemon to do anything more in this letter than to accept Onesimus as his brother in Christ and to welcome him as if he were Paul. To what, then, does the "even more" in verse 21 refer? It could simply be a crowning rhetorical flourish. It might allude to Paul's desire to have "his heart" returned to him so that Onesimus can continue his service to him. It might also imply that Philemon will give Onesimus his freedom. I opt for this last alternative. Paul is hopeful—more than that, confident—that Philemon will set Onesimus free so that he might devote himself fully to serving in the gospel. (Garland)