CORNERSTONE CONNECTIONS
MAY 09 2026

trading places

Scripture Story: Philemon.
Commentary: *The Acts of the Apostles* (or *Unlikely Leaders*), chapter 43.
Key Text: Philemon 8, 9.

PREPARING TO TEACH

I. SYNOPSIS

The Christian life is a difficult journey. In fact, life in general can be tough. However, we can take comfort in the knowledge that God did not design for us to go through life alone. We are made to be sociable, and compassion is a key component in surviving the challenges in life. Compassion means we carry each other's burdens. In Colossians 3:12 Paul writes: "Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience" (NIV).

To be compassionate is to have a keen sympathy for the sufferings of others, accompanied by a deep urge to help. As followers and emulators of Christ, we need to exemplify the attitudes of mercy and pity, even when the aggrieved is ourselves. This is not to say that we allow injustice to prevail. Rather, when faced with sincere repentance, we must dig deep to find the compassion to forgive and, if possible, restore relationships.

Ellen White writes: "The apostle reminded Philemon that every good purpose and trait of character which he possessed was due to the grace of Christ; this alone made him different from the perverse and the sinful. The same grace could make the debased criminal a child of God and a useful laborer in the gospel" (*The Acts of the Apostles,* p. 457).

II. TARGET

The students will:

- Understand the biblical meaning and application of compassion. *(Know)*
- Be challenged to acts of compassion. *(Feel)*
- Perform acts of compassion as led by the Holy Spirit. *(Respond)*

III. EXPLORE

Growing in Christ, Seventh-day Adventist Fundamental Beliefs, No. 11

"By His death on the cross Jesus triumphed over the forces of evil. He who subjugated the demonic spirits during His earthly ministry has broken their power and made certain their ultimate doom. Jesus' victory gives us victory over the evil forces that still seek to control us, as we walk with Him in peace, joy, and assurance of His love. Now the Holy Spirit dwells within us and empowers us. Continually committed to Jesus as our Savior and Lord, we are set free from the burden of our past deeds. No longer do we live in the darkness, fear of evil powers, ignorance, and meaninglessness of our former way of life. In this new freedom in Jesus, we are called to grow into the likeness of His character, communing with Him daily in prayer, feeding on His Word, meditating on it and on His providence, singing His praises, gathering together for worship, and participating in the mission of the Church. We are also called to follow Christ's example by compassionately ministering to the physical, mental, social, emotional, and spiritual needs of humanity. As we give ourselves in loving service to those around us and in witnessing to His salvation, His constant

presence with us through the Spirit transforms every moment and every task into a spiritual experience" (1 Chron. 29:11; Ps. 1:1, 2; 23:4; 77:11, 12; Matt. 20:25-28; 25:31-46; Luke 10:17-20; John 20:21; Rom. 8:38, 39; 2 Cor. 3:17, 18; Gal. 5:22-25; Eph. 5:19, 20; 6:12-18; Phil. 3:7-14; Col. 1:13, 14; 2:6, 14, 15; 1 Thess. 5:16-18, 23; Heb. 10:25; James 1:27; 2 Peter 2:9; 3:18; 1 John 4:4).

TEACHING

I. GETTING STARTED

Activity

Refer the students to the What Do You Think? *section of their lesson. After they have completed it, discuss their responses.*

Challenge the students to think of the meaning of compassion. Ask them what it looks like, how to apply it, and why it is a key element in the Christian life. As you brainstorm with the class, record their answers on a whiteboard.

Illustration

Share this illustration in your own words:

"Louisa's life changed in an instant. One moment she was basking in the warm sunshine, listening to the ocean waves crash on a Long Island beach, and the next moment she was horror-struck. She and her husband, along with their 4-year-old daughter, were startled when they heard the frantic cries of a drowning boy. Louisa's husband tried to save him, but the boy pulled him under the water. Both drowned as Louisa and her 4-year-old watched in stunned agony.

"Louisa Stead was an immigrant in America. She and her husband had recently come to New York with their daughter, seeking a better life. Now she felt like she was a strange woman in a strange land with no family, friends, or support. She had no one to depend on except the Lord. She and her daughter lived in abject poverty. At times they had very little to eat. One morning she came to the end of her resources, without money or food. After earnestly seeking God, Louisa opened the front door. To her utter surprise, she discovered someone had left food and money on her doorstep. In deep gratitude she wrote [the] hymn ["'Tis So Sweet to Trust in Jesus"]. . . .

"The life of trust is sweet. It relieves us of all-absorbing anxiety. It delivers us from paralyzing worry. It chases away the depressing darkness that takes the light from our eyes and the joy from our souls. 'When in faith we take hold of His strength, He will change, wonderfully change the most hopeless, discouraging outlook. He will do this for the glory of His name' (*Testimonies*, vol. 8, p. 12).

"Like Stead, we too can live the sweet life of trust. In the difficult circumstances of our own lives we too can sing, 'I'm so glad I learned to trust Thee, Precious Jesus, Savior, Friend; and I know that Thou art with me, wilt be with me till the end'" (Mark Finley, *Solid Ground,* p. 281).

II. TEACHING THE STORY

Bridge to the Story

Ask the students if anyone can remember any stories of Jesus showing compassion and helping people. Then share the following stories from Scripture in your own words:

- Matthew 14:14 (Jesus heals the sick.)
- John 4:4-26 (Jesus visits with the Samaritan woman at the well.)
- Luke 5:17-26 (Jesus heals a paralytic.)
- Mark 10:46-52 (Jesus heals blind Bartimaeus.)
- Matthew 9:18-26 (Jesus heals a dead girl and a sick woman.)

It is easy to say that Jesus could do all of these because He is God. However, we can still show compassion and help others in our own way.

Out of the Story for Teachers

After you read the Into the Story *section with your students, use the following in your own words to process it with them.*

- *Circle* the main actors in this story.
- *Underline* the parts of the story that are essential to understanding it.
- Share any aspects of the story that are new to you.
- Paul offered to repay Onesimus's debt if it made it easier for Philemon to accept him back into the household. Discuss what this teaches us about compassion.
- What new thing about God have you learned from Onesimus's story? Explain.
- *Draw a rectangle* around the emotions, actions, and adjectives that enrich this story.

- What lesson from this story will you apply to your life?
- *Put a star* next to the words or phrases that capture the various emotions of this story.

Use the following as other teachable passages that relate to today's story:

- Read Colossians 3:12 and compare Paul's actions to help Onesimus. Why do you think Paul would choose to help Onesimus to this extent?
- Read Ephesians 4:32. Imagine if you were Philemon. What would your response be toward this wayward servant after having read Paul's impassioned letter?
- Read Philippians 2:1-4. What does a follower of Christ behave like?

Sharing Context and Background

Use the following information to shed more light on specific aspects of the story for your students. Share it in your own words.

1. Understanding the historical setting of slavery in Rome during Paul's time

According to the *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, slaves were an accepted part of society and considered to be members of their master's household. It was so common that the proportion of free men to slaves was three to one. At that time in Rome a slave had no rights, and their masters held power of life and death over them. This was not to say that the life of a slave was arbitrarily torturous. In fact, some slaves were known to be teachers, doctors, and managers of their master's estates.

2. Applying the compassion of Christ

Ellen White offers this commentary on Paul's letter to Philemon: "Paul voluntarily proposed to assume the debt of Onesimus in order that the guilty one might be spared the disgrace of punishment, and might again enjoy the privileges he had forfeited. 'If thou count me therefore a partner,' he wrote to Philemon, 'receive him as myself. If he hath wronged thee, or oweth thee ought, put that on mine account; I Paul have written it with mine own hand, I will repay it.' How fitting an

Tips for Top-Notch Teaching

Positive Reinforcement

Try positive reinforcement. Don't give empty praises but do take note of any progress made and acknowledge it, no matter how small.

If you made any agreements with your students about their homework (e.g., you will allow snacks for everyone if they come with lessons prepared), then make sure you follow through on your agreement.

Finally, be positive and supportive. Teens respond not just to the work but to the person conducting the lessons. They will be more open and cooperative if they know that they can trust you.

Teaching From . . .

Refer your students to the other sections of their lesson.

- **Key Text**
  Invite students to share the Key Text *with the class if they have committed it to memory.*
- **Flashlight**
  Read the Flashlight *statement, pointing out that most of the time it is from the commentary on this week's story found in the book* The Acts of the Apostles. *Ask what relationship they see between the statement and what they have just discussed from* Out of the Story.
- **Punch Lines**
  Point out to your students the verses listed in their lesson that relate to this week's story. Have them share the verse that spoke most directly to them and allow them to explain why they chose it.
- **Further Insight**
  Ask them how the quote in Further Insight *conveys the point of the story in this lesson.*

illustration of the love of Christ for the repentant sinner! The servant who had defrauded his master had nothing with which to make restitution. The sinner who has robbed God of years of service has no means of canceling the debt. Jesus interposes between the sinner and God, saying, I will pay the debt. Let the sinner be spared; I will suffer in his stead" (*The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 458).

3. Paul's compassionate rhetorical skills toward Philemon

Although Paul could have leveraged on his standing as an elder and an apostle and demanded that Philemon take Onesimus back (Philemon 8, 9), that would run contradictory to the compassionate response that Paul was trying to evoke from Philemon. How could Philemon make a charitable decision if he felt coerced? Compassion cannot be forced. As much as Paul was a compassionate advocate of Onesimus, he also treated Philemon with compassion, and in turn, asked that Onesimus be treated the same.

In what variety of means and mediums can we apply Christ's compassion?

III. CLOSING

Activity

Close with an activity and debrief it in your own words.

Invite the students to create a list titled "Top Ten Ways to Show Compassion." When they have finished, have each student read their list. After everyone has had the chance to share their ideas, have the students vote on their top 10 favorites. Compile those into a master list and type it up, photocopy it, and ask them to put it in a place where they can read it often. Challenge them to put the ideas into practice and then discuss the results the following week in Sabbath School.

Summary

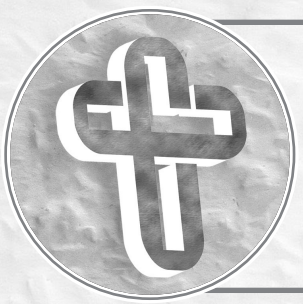
Share this story from Brian Cavanaugh's book The Sower's Seeds:

There is an old Chinese tale about a woman whose only son died. She went to a wise man to ask for help and find comfort and relief from her grief and sorrow. He advised her: "Fetch me a mustard seed from a home that has never known sorrow. We will use it to drive the sorrow out of your life." The woman went off at once in search of that miracle mustard seed.

She came first to a splendid mansion, knocked at the door, and said, "I am looking for a home that has never known sorrow. Is this such a place? It is very important to me."

They told her, "You've certainly come to the wrong place," and began to describe all the tragic things that recently had befallen them.

The woman said to herself, "Who is better able to help these poor, unfortunate people than I, who have had misfortune of my own?" She stayed to comfort them, then went on in search of a home that had never known sorrow. But wherever she turned, in hovels and in other places, she found one tale after another of sadness and misfortune. She became so involved in ministering to other people's grief that ultimately she forgot about her quest for the mustard seed, never realizing that it had, in fact, driven the sorrow out of her life (www.inspirationalstories.com/1/130.html).



Remind the students about the reading plan that will take them through the inspired commentary of the Bible, the Conflict of the Ages Series. The reading that goes with this lesson is *The Acts of the Apostles* (or *Unlikely Leaders*), chapter 43.

LESSON 6

CORNERSTONECONNECTIONS

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STUDENT LESSON

Scripture Story: Philemon.
Commentary: *The Acts of the Apostles* (or *Unlikely Leaders*), chapter 43.

trading places



Photo by Colleen Cahill

keytext

"Therefore, although in Christ I could be bold and order you to do what you ought to do, yet I prefer to appeal to you on the basis of love."

(Philemon 8, 9, NIV)

flashlight

"Among those who gave their hearts to God through the labors of Paul in Rome was Onesimus, a pagan slave who had wronged his master, Philemon, a Christian believer in Colosse, and had escaped to Rome. In the kindness of his heart, Paul sought to relieve the poverty and distress of the wretched fugitive and then endeavored to shed the light of truth into his darkened mind. Onesimus listened to the words of life, confessed his sins, and was converted to the faith of Christ" (*The Acts of the Apostles,* p. 456).

what do you think?

Think of a time when you had to borrow someone else's clothes to wear. What did you have to wear? Did anything funny happen as a result? Were you able to find something you liked or suited your tastes? Or did you feel silly and uncomfortable because the outfits were "sooo not you"?

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did you know?

According to Webster's, the definition of compassion is: "Sorrow for the sufferings or troubles of another or others accompanied by a deep urge to help."

Paul wrote Colossians, and he also wrote Corinthians. In 2 Corinthians 1:3 he uses the same word when referring to God as the "Father of mercies." We can infer that Paul is saying that we are filled with a sense of compassion when we see someone is hurting, and we feel the urge to want to make things better, to help in some way. Compassion is not just an act for show. It should be a gut reaction—coming from deep inside.

INTO THE STORY

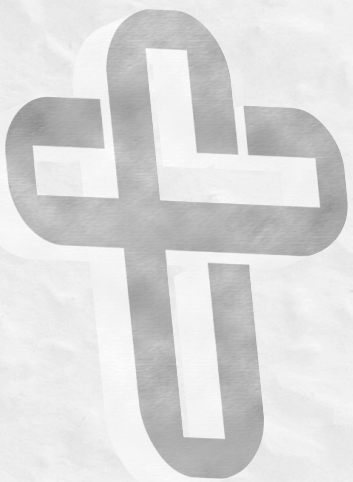
"I always thank my God as I remember you in my prayers, because I hear about your love for all his holy people and your faith in the Lord Jesus. I pray that your partnership with us in the faith may be effective in deepening your understanding of every good thing we share for the sake of Christ. Your love has given me great joy and encouragement, because you, brother, have refreshed the hearts of the Lord's people.

"Therefore, although in Christ I could be bold and order you to do what you ought to do, 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—that I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, who became my son while I was in chains. Formerly he was useless to you, but now he has become useful both to you and to me.

"I am sending him—who is my very heart—back to you. 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. 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. Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back forever—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.

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

(Philemon 4-21, NIV)



OUT OF THE STORY

From the passage above, list to whom Paul is writing and whom this letter is about. Describe their characteristics as seen through Paul's eyes.

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What is Paul asking for? What assurances does he give? Show why you think he was moved so readily to give such assurances.

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Imagine you were Philemon. What would your response be? Explain.

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How can Paul's example of appealing to love rather than displaying force be helpful in your interactions with others?

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What do you think is the "big picture" of the passages above? In one phrase sum up the main thought of the passages above. Share with the class why you made that statement.

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punch lines

"Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you" **(Ephesians 4:32, NIV).**

"Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ" **(Galatians 6:2, NIV).**

"Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience" **(Colossians 3:12, NIV).**

"Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn" **(Romans 12:15, NIV).**

"If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others" **(Philippians 2:1-4, NIV).**

further insight

"The sinner who has robbed God of years of service has no means of canceling the debt. Jesus interposes between the sinner and God, saying, I will pay the debt. Let the sinner be spared; I will suffer in his stead."

—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles,* p. 458

Sabbath

In a small group of friends, share the answers you gave in the *What Do You Think?* section. Believe it or not, we are asked to share not only our clothes, but everything else—including our burdens. Read the following verses and discuss what they have to say about compassion.

- Acts 2:42-47
- Acts 4:32-35
- Galatians 6:2
- Colossians 3:12
- 2 Corinthians 1:3

Sunday

Read Ephesians 4:32.

Think about the story of Onesimus and Philemon. Reflect on the following questions:

Paul believed that Onesimus had changed and was willing to vouch for him to Philemon. Have you ever helped someone out with a tough time in their life? Share that story with your class. How did it make you feel?

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Can you have compassion for someone you don't know? What about caring for people in another country? What would that look like?

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Who do you know is going through a tough time right now? How can you help that person?

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Monday

Read Philemon 8, 9.

Paul did not simply order Philemon to accept Onesimus back into his household. Instead, he pleaded with him to accept Onesimus on the basis of love. Was Paul feeling sorry for Onesimus or having compassion on him? What is the difference?

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Tuesday

Read Philippians 2:1-4.

In chapter 43 of *The Acts of the Apostles*, Ellen White gives the background story of what happened to Onesimus. Review the chapter in *The Acts of the Apostles*. Onesimus was a thief, but Paul was willing to appeal to Philemon on his behalf. Why? What does this say about the following concepts?

Repentance _____

_____

Forgiveness _____

_____

Compassion _____

_____

Wednesday

Apply the selected *Punch Lines* to your life by filling in the blanks:

"Carry each other's burdens" (Galatians 6:2, NIV). What are some burdens you can carry for your friends?

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"Clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience" (Colossians 3:12, NIV). What is one way you can show compassion to a total stranger?

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"Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other" (Ephesians 4:32, NIV). This is what the command is telling me to do today:

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Thursday

Read Galatians 6:2.

What is keeping me from carrying someone else's burdens or from helping those around me? How can I change that and be more compassionate?

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Friday

Read Colossians 3:12.

Ask yourself: How would the world be different today if more people had compassion for one another?

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this week's reading*

The Acts of the Apostles (or *Unlikely Leaders*), chapter 43.

**Unlikely Leaders* is a special adaptation of *The Acts of the Apostles,* created for you by the Ellen G. White Estate and Pacific Press. Get more information about it at www.cornerstoneconnections.net/article/191/about-us/conflict-of-the-ages-companion-books#.URlhF1rBO9s. By following the weekly reading plan, you will read at least one book of the Conflict of the Ages Series each year.