

Final Requests: Philemon 19-25
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Forgiveness is what we've been talking about for the past few weeks as we've been studying Paul's letter to Philemon. Forgiveness is a difficult thing. It is not always easy to forgive. Sometimes it may be fairly easy, if the offense is minor. But there are certain offenses that are very difficult to forgive. Things that others have done that have left deep emotional wounds. Decisions, words, actions that have made us feel totally betrayed. I don't know all the details of your lives, but I assume that there are many of us who, right now, are struggling with this issue of forgiveness. A friend, a family member, a co-worker, a brother or sister in Christ, has hurt you in a particular way, and you simply cannot find it in your heart to forgive that person. Whenever you think of that person, and the wounds that have been inflicted, bitterness and resentment fill your heart. Compassion and love and forgiveness escape you. Why is that? Why is forgiveness so hard?

I'm sure there are many reasons, but two come to mind. Two problems in our own hearts that make it difficult for us to forgive others. First of all, it's difficult to forgive because we think too highly of ourselves. We think we deserve to be treated in a particular way. We have this standard of how we think we ought to be treated. Others should like me and encourage me and treat me kindly. They should never say or do hurtful things against me. And because of this standard we have, and because we think too highly of ourselves, when someone sins against us, we think it's our job to punish them. I'm not going to forgive that person. I'm going to punish them. I'm going to say and do hurtful things back. I'm going to do whatever I can to make that person's life miserable.

Isn't that how we respond often times? We want to take justice into our own hands, and based on our high estimation of ourselves, we decide to dole out punishment instead of forgiveness.

Let me say that I'm not meaning to minimize in any way the grave sins that are committed against us. People do wicked and evil things, and unfortunately we can find ourselves on the receiving end of those actions. Maybe some of you here have been abused as children, or in your adult life. Maybe you've been physically abused, or sexually abused, or you've had a parent or guardian or boss or sibling who has repeatedly lashed out at you verbally, and the emotional scars are deep. Maybe someone has been dishonest, or has stolen from you. These are evil, sinful actions, and God will deal with those sins. I don't want to diminish the severity of these things at all. But whatever the offense, however great or small, we need to forgive. And when we think too highly of ourselves, that becomes a barrier to forgiveness.

We need to humble ourselves and see that we, too, are sinners who sin against others, and most significantly, against God. Which means that what we really deserve is not what we think we deserve. What we really deserve is not to be treated kindly and to have everyone like us. But as those who have disobeyed the holy God, we deserve eternal punishment. That's what we deserve, and to understand that puts everything in perspective. We have to view ourselves appropriately. We can't think too highly of ourselves.

Another barrier to forgiveness is that we don't think highly enough of the cross. The cross is where our forgiveness was purchased by our Lord Jesus Christ. He died so that we don't have to. He was punished so that we can be forgiven. And if He has forgiven us such a great debt (an infinite debt), then in turn we ought to forgive those who have sinned against us. Ephesians 4:32, "Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you." That's our model. We have been forgiven much, and we must forgive much.

If we commune with the Lord in His Word and in prayer, and we center our lives on the Gospel and continually turn our attention back to the wonder of the cross, then we will NOT think too highly of ourselves, and we will not hypocritically desire forgiveness for ourselves without the willingness to forgive others. As we center our lives on the cross we will be so in awe of the forgiveness we've received that, by God's grace, we will extend that kind of forgiveness to others.

The situation that we're looking at in Philemon is the case of a runaway slave. Onesimus was a slave of Philemon's, and Onesimus stole from Philemon and ran away to Rome. There he was converted under the ministry of the Apostle Paul, and now Paul is sending Onesimus back to Colossae to his master Philemon. And he sends this letter with him which makes a loving appeal to Philemon to forgive the wrongs that Onesimus committed against him. These were not easy things to forgive. These were not minor offenses. But Paul builds his case to persuade Philemon to forgive.

Let's read through this letter one last time, and then we will study the concluding verses (19-25). I plan on spending two more Sundays addressing the issue of slavery in the Bible. As we've been talking about the case of this runaway slave, maybe there have been questions that have come to mind. I want to address this more specifically in my next two sermons, and I think it will offer us some profound insights into the Gospel as we look at how the Bible talks about slavery. This morning we will look at these remaining verses in Paul's letter to Philemon.

It's in verse 17 that Paul finally comes out and makes a clear request. He wants Philemon to receive Onesimus back as he would receive Paul, himself. In other words, receive him back kindly and graciously. Forgive him. Then in verse 18 Paul says that he will pay the debt owed by Onesimus. "Charge that to my account," he says.

In verse 19 Paul does an interesting thing in order to show that he is utterly serious about this. You see, Paul would at least sometimes dictate his letters to a scribe. Paul would speak, and the secretary would write. And then sometimes Paul would take the pen in his own hand and write out a greeting at the end. Here in verse 19 of his letter to Philemon, Paul takes the pen in his own hand and confirms that he is really serious about this. "I, Paul, write this with my own hand: I will repay it."

In the second half of the verse he makes a comment that will put things in perspective for Philemon. Paul wants him to view the *material* debt that Onesimus owes to him in light of the *spiritual* debt that Philemon owes to Paul, and to the Lord. Paul says, "to say nothing of your owing me even your own self." In the NASB it reads, "not to mention to you that you owe to me even your own self as well." This is one of those ways of saying something that you're not going to say. "I'm not even going to say it, but you know that you owe me even your own self."

The point of this reminder is similar to the point of Jesus' parable in Matthew 18 that I've mentioned in previous weeks. The master forgives the slave's debt of 10,000

talents, but then that slave will not forgive the much smaller debt that a fellow slave owes him. That shouldn't be. The one who is forgiven must also forgive. Thus, Paul reminds Philemon that he is a man in great debt. He owes Paul his very life, because Paul introduced him to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Philemon owes a spiritual debt to his father in the Lord, and that spiritual debt is so much more significant than the material debt Onesimus owes.

This goes back to what I was saying at the beginning, and what we've been seeing about forgiveness all along. When we can see ourselves rightly, and grasp the depth of forgiveness needed to cover our sins, then our joy of being forgiven will overflow in forgiving others. When we realize the spiritual debt we owe to others and to the Lord, then we will delight to erase the debt others owe us. God will do this in our hearts as He sanctifies us, as He makes us holy. The impulse to forgive is not something we can produce on our own, but God does this supernatural work in our hearts to make us gracious and merciful and forgiving.

I was in Minneapolis this week at a conference for pastors, and one of the speakers was Greg Livingstone, who has been a missionary to Muslims since 1963, and has mobilized many others to serve among Muslim peoples. As he shared about his upbringing, and his conversion, and his call into missions, he said, "I don't know why God called me into missions because I don't like spicy food, I don't like to travel, and I don't like people!" (this quote is from memory, probably not verbatim). But then he said God did something about that third thing. He had grown up not knowing his father at all. He lived in foster homes. He was bitter and resentful and angry. At age 16 a girl he liked invited him to a movie theater. He went, thinking he would see a movie, but instead it turned out to be a church service that was held in a theater. And it was there that he heard the Gospel for the first time. He was converted shortly after that time, and God began to change him. He said he noticed a feeling inside of him that he had never experienced before. He actually wanted to help other people, rather than just step on them. This was totally new.

This is what God does in our lives. Do you feel that in your life? Do you have a desire to help others? Do you have a desire to forgive others? This is not something that comes from our flesh. It's contrary to our flesh. But as the Spirit works in us, we are changed so that we want to forgive others rather than punish them.

In verse 20 Paul writes, "Yes, brother, I want some benefit from you in the Lord. Refresh my heart in Christ." He uses another play on words here, because the name Onesimus, which means "useful," is derived from the same word that is used here for "benefit." And Paul wants benefit from Philemon. He wants Philemon to refresh his heart in Christ. At the beginning of the letter, in verse 7, Paul said, "For I have derived much joy and comfort from your love, my brother, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you." He knows that Philemon has already refreshed the hearts of the saints, and now he commands him, "Refresh *my* heart in Christ."

When real forgiveness happens in a relationship, it is something that brings glory to God and it brings joy to the saints. It refreshes our hearts to see God working in lives so that relationships are reconciled. Here's a further reason to forgive: It will be a blessing to the Christian community around you. It will refresh our hearts in Christ.

Next, Paul appeals to Philemon's obedience. He writes in verse 21, "Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say." Paul

knows Philemon and has heard of his love and faith, as he wrote back in verse 5. So Paul has confidence that Philemon is going to be obedient to the Lord and do what a Christian ought to do. He's going to forgive Onesimus.

Paul's confidence in Philemon is so great, in fact, he says that he knows Philemon "will do even more than I say." What could Paul have in mind here? Is he giving another hint that he would like Onesimus to be freed from slavery? Is he communicating between the lines that he would like for Onesimus to be returned to Rome to continue serving in the Gospel ministry there? Whatever it is, Paul desires that Philemon not just "go through the motions" of forgiveness. Paul wants this forgiveness to be extravagant. He wants Philemon to go above and beyond what is expected. He wants him to lavish forgiveness and mercy and kindness upon this runaway slave Onesimus. He wants to see Philemon's faith and love shine forth brightly in this situation to the glory of God.

He concludes in verse 22 with another request. Really two requests. First, he wants Philemon to prepare a guest room for him. He wants to come and visit Philemon, and this would obviously be further incentive for Philemon to do what he knows he needs to do. He needs to forgive Onesimus. And it's likely that Paul will be coming to Colossae to see whether or not that has happened. There's a little accountability going on here. Paul wants and expects to visit this household and have his heart refreshed by a wonderful story of reconciliation.

A second request is implied in this verse, and it's a request for prayer. Paul assumes that Philemon and his household are praying for him, and his hope is that through their prayers he will be released from his imprisonment in Rome and be able to travel to Colossae. Notice the divine passive. I mentioned this last week in verse 15, where Paul alludes to God's sovereignty by writing, "For this perhaps is why *he was parted* (passive tense verb) from you for a while, that you might have him back forever." What he's saying is, "*God* took him away from you for a while for this purpose: that you might have him back forever." Another divine passive shows up now in verse 22. "for I am hoping that through your prayers *I will be graciously given to you.*" In other words, "I hope that through your prayers *God* will deliver me from prison and bring me to you."

This teaches us something very important about prayer. Can you see it in this verse? God acts. God moves. God delivers people from trials and provides for their needs, as Paul is hoping will happen in his situation. AND God does these things through the prayers of His people. He acts through our prayers. It is crucial that we understand this about prayer. On the one hand, we can't think that our prayers manipulate God in any way or change what He has planned to do. On the other hand, though, we shouldn't fall into a fatalistic view of how God acts. "He's going to do what He's going to do, and therefore I don't need to do anything." That is NOT the way the Bible teaches us to view God's sovereignty. Yes, He's in control, and He will accomplish His purposes. But He uses means to accomplish those purposes, and one very important means He uses is our prayers.

And it's in this way that Paul is hoping that the prayers of Philemon and his household will be a means of his deliverance. He wants to be released from his imprisonment in Rome, and he wants to go to Colossae. He trusts that his brothers and sisters in Christ will be praying for this, and his hope is that God will work through those prayers and accomplish this request.

Paul concludes the letter by listing several other individuals who send their greetings to Philemon. This would serve as a reminder to Philemon that he is part of a community of believers. There are fellow Christians who support him and are praying for him in this difficult situation that he's facing.

The last sentence of the letter is: "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit." And thus he ends the letter, as he began it, with grace. In verse 3 he said, "Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." And now he signs off his letter in a similar way, and a way consistent with his other letters.

I want to briefly raise two questions that come to mind as we think about this situation between Philemon and Onesimus, and then I'll close with a final challenge to all of us.

One very obvious question is: How did Philemon respond to this letter? Did he comply with Paul's wishes? Did he forgive? Did he receive Onesimus back graciously and kindly? Was there reconciliation? I think we can pretty safely answer yes to those questions, even though we don't have a statement anywhere that tells us exactly what happened. But the fact that this letter was preserved and was included in the canon of Scripture is a very strong indication that Philemon responded positively. If he had responded negatively, the letter probably wouldn't have been circulated (see Murray J. Harris, *Colossians and Philemon*, pg. 243). Philemon, as we saw in verse 5, already had a reputation for his faith and love. And we can assume that he graciously forgave Onesimus and did even more than Paul asked of him.

The second question that comes to mind is: What happened to Onesimus after this? Again, we don't know for sure. But it is interesting that a few decades later there was a man named Onesimus who was the bishop of the church in Ephesus. We have no way of knowing if it could be the same person. Onesimus was a common name. But if this was the same man, then this becomes quite a testimony to the transforming power of the Gospel. I guess we'll need to wait until we're in heaven to find out the rest of the details of this intriguing story. But the clear purpose of the letter is something that we need to live out today. God is calling each and every one of us to forgive. As Christians, we cannot hypocritically seek God's forgiveness while refusing to forgive others. We must forgive one another, as God in Christ forgave us (Ephesians 4:32). And so I close with this challenge, to consider whether there are any individuals in your life whom you need to forgive. Are there any unresolved conflicts? Are there relationships that have been severed because one or both of you will not forgive? Is there bitterness and resentment that consumes you? Let me tell you, brothers and sisters, that bitterness will eat you up on the inside, and it will make your life a living hell. Don't live that way. Don't be hardhearted. Do the difficult but glorious thing that Philemon did. Forgive! Whether the other person is repentant or not, whether they are going to change or not: forgive them. Don't hold that offense against them. Don't try to punish them for what they've done. Put it in God's hands, and determine that you are going to live your life trusting in God's sovereignty and goodness rather than trying to even the score with those who have wronged you.

Don Carson was the keynote speaker at the pastor's conference I just returned from, and the topic of his talks was "The Pastor as father and son." He talked about this from many different angles, but toward the end of his talk Tuesday evening he acknowledged the fact that some fathers and sons are not even on speaking terms. There

has been a rift in the relationship and they aren't even talking to each other. And he said, if that's the case in your situation, "before you go to bed tonight, phone them." And that's the challenge I make to us this morning. If there is a family member, or a friend, or someone in the church, with whom you need to seek reconciliation, please don't delay. May today be the day of forgiveness.