

Philemon – Beloved Brother, Fellow Worker
(A Study in Forgiving)
Philemon 1-7
Reading: Genesis 3:1- 7

Bethany Baptist Church
June 27, 2021

...pray...

Paul was in prison. His first Roman imprisonment, from **60-62 AD**.

Paul *prayed, read, entertained guests* (Epaphras, an elder from Colossae), *advised* the church in Rome, *witnessed* to every one of his guards, and *wrote letters* to the churches.

We know of **five** of those letters, the **NT** contains copies of **four** of them:

Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon. (the letter to *Laodiceans* is mentioned in **Col 4:15,16**, but we **don't** have it in our **NT**)

Bible teachers and preachers refer to these four letters as Paul's *Prison Epistles*.

We are going to spend three Lord's Days unpacking that **fourth** letter, the little epistle of *Philemon*.

Let's read Paul's letter together (Philemon 1-25; focus = vv.1-7)

Philemon was a respected Christian business man, in the city of Colossae.

He was well-known for his *godly character* and *good deeds*. The *church* met in his home. He was even friends with the *apostle Paul* and *Timothy*!

Not that his life was *care free* – whose is...? In fact, some months before he received Paul's letter, Philemon's *slave*, Onesimus, ran away! How *disrespectful*, how *ungrateful* (good master!), how *disappointing*!

Almost *insulting*! Wait till Philemon *gets his hands on that guy*! What do you suppose he'd *do*...? Roman law would let him do *almost anything*!

But, we've *just read* what the apostle Paul wants Philemon to do: *forgive Onesimus*!

That's a big ask!

The theme (big idea) in *Philemon* is **forgiving**.

In this morning's text (vv.1-7)...

Paul's greeting prepares Philemon for a *big favor* (not *receive*, but *do!*).

- 1. A *greeting* that offers encouragement (vv.1-3)**
- 2. A *prayer* that praises and previews (vv.4-7)**

Paul's greeting offers *encouragement*, but also invites *accountability* (vv.1-3).

1. Paul writes to his friend *Philemon* during his *first Roman imprisonment* (60-62 AD).
 - a. In that same period, we know he *also wrote* to the churches in *Ephesus, Philippi, Laodicea* (Col 4:16), and *Colossae*.
 - b. For the most part, this letter looks a lot like Paul's other letters.
 - c. It begins with an opening that includes a *salutation* (1,2), a *blessing* (3), and *prayer of thankfulness* (4-7). (**Today's text.**)
 - d. The *main body* (thus *purpose*) of the letter comes in **vv.8-22**, and the *closing salutation* in **vv.23-24**.
 - e. This was a fairly *standard format* for **1st** century letters.
 - f. *Philemon* is Paul's only "*personal*" NT letter, written to an *individual* and dealing with a *personal issue* involving these two friends: *Paul* and *Philemon*.
 - g. And in this "*personal*" letter, even Paul's *opening* contains some *subtle clues* encouragement about his purpose.

2. As you *read* through *Philemon*, you notice there are a lot *names*. Some you've read in *other letters* (e.g. Timothy, Luke). Let's use the **vv.1&2** to identify the *main characters* and the *supporting cast*.
 - a. *Paul* (1)
 - i. Paul introduces himself as *a prisoner of Christ Jesus*. *It is his*
 - ii. He is in prison because He *follows* Jesus and *preaches* Jesus.

b. *Philemon* (1)

- i. Paul greets his friend with two kind words: *beloved* (*brother*) and *fellow worker*.
 1. *Fellow worker* tells us that Philemon has supported Paul and labored with Paul in the gospel.
 2. *Beloved* (by *Paul*, by the *church*, by *Jesus*) confirms that their relationship was *warm* and grounded in the *gospel*.
- ii. Sooner or later, the letter will tell us *even more* about *Philemon*.
 1. The Colossian *church* met in his home (2).
 - a. Congregations **didn't** have dedicated church buildings until early in the 3rd Century (~320-25).
 - b. There are several references to Christians who hosted their church in their home: e.g. *Mary* the mother of *John Mark*; *Lydia the Purple Seller*, *Aquila & Priscilla*, etc.)
 2. He owned *slaves*...or at least *a* slave. (Thus our letter...)
 3. So we can surmise that Philemon was *wealthy*!
 4. There is **no** *indication* that Philemon was an *elder* or *deacon* or *teacher*. Perhaps he was *business man*.
 5. But, as we are about to find out, he was a man that was *rich in good deeds* – an *encouragement* to all who knew him, a *beloved brother*.
 - a. Paul had led Philemon to *saving faith* in Jesus (**19**).
 - b. Probably when the apostle preached in *Ephesus*, because Paul has **never** been to *Colossae*.

6. *One more thing*, Philemon has been **wronged!** *Deserted, disappointed, disrespected.*

- c. *God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ* (1, 3).
 - i. *Paul's identity, Philemon's identity, their ministries, their lives,* are all *rooted* in their relationship to God, in Jesus Christ.
 - ii. The *love* of God and our *accountability* to God are the *foundation* of Paul's appeal.
- d. And one more *main character* we won't actually meet until v.10 – a runaway slave named *Onesimus*. To the point: *Philemon's* runaway slave...!
 - i. Onesimus *ran away* from Colossae. That was a crime!
 - ii. Onesimus possibly *stole* from Philemon as he went. Another crime!
 - iii. Onesimus *ran into* Paul (etc) in Rome! (Do you believe in God's *providence!*?)
 - iv. Paul led Onesimus to *saving faith* in Jesus' *death & resurrection*.
- e. We should also *spotlight* a few members of the *supporting cast*. Paul mentions them very *briefly*, but very *intentionally*.
 - i. *Apphia* (2) – a *sister* in Christ, and very likely *Philemon's* wife. (Notice this unadorned example of a Christian man married to Christian woman!)
 - ii. *Archippus* (2) – most likely the *son* of *Philemon & Apphia*. Beyond that, a *fellow worker* in the cause of Christ! In Paul's vocabulary, *that* is the language of *appreciation & respect*.
 - iii. *The church in Philemon's house* (2) – the *born again* and *baptized* members of the church in Colossae. Philemon's home has become their *gathering place*.

- iv. I think we should also mention *Epaphras* (23). We can assume from **Col 1:7,8 & 4:12,13** that *Epaphras* was an *elder* in the Colossian church, and therefore Philemon's *pastor*. He happened to be in Rome with *Paul* and *Timothy* and *Onesimus*!
3. Paul follows his *greeting* with a brief but familiar *blessing* in v3: ***Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.***
- a. Paul reminds Philemon that the Christian's *fundamental blessings* are *grace* from God which leads to *peace* with God & His church.
 - i. *Grace* (defn) – “God giving you the desire and the power to understand and obey His will. First at salvation. Then every day that follows!”
 - ii. *Peace* – *Peace* w/ God because *by grace* we've been reconciled to God. *Peace* with one another because we are now God's family.
 - b. The *theology* of Paul's greeting goes *even deeper*: Paul credits our grace and peace to *both* the Father and the Son. A clear implication that God and Jesus are *equal* – therefore Jesus is truly God.

4. We have *barely opened* Paul's letter, but already you can detect some hints of its *message (purpose)*: **forgiving**.
- a. If you **haven't** already caught on, Paul wants to persuade Philemon to *forgive* his runaway slave, *Onesimus*.
 - b. And here is the *first hint* (1): *Paul, a **prisoner** of Christ Jesus...to Philemon*.
 - i. It's a subtle argument (appeal) *from greater to lesser*...
 - ii. As Philemon *reads* Paul's letter, perhaps more than once, and *weighs* Paul's plea, it is *bound to occur to him*:
 1. *If Paul, my friend, can endure incarceration in Rome...*
 2. *...can't I heed his appeal, and forgive my slave?*
 - c. Here is the *second hint* of Paul's purpose: *Apphia* (wife), *Archippus* (son), and the entire *church* that meets each Lord's Day in his *living room*.
 - i. *Don't miss this*, Paul intends for Philemon to *read* this letter, then to *read* it to his family, then to **read it to the church!**
 - ii. That is why Paul addresses the letter: *to Philemon...to Apphia...to Archippus...to the church*.
 - iii. And that's why the *grammar* in his blessing (3) is plural: *Grace to y'all*, and not just *Grace to you* – *Philemon*.
 - iv. Paul wrote a very *private letter* to a very *public audience*.
 1. It will allow Philemon's friends to *counsel* with him, to *pray* for him, ...
 2. ... and perhaps most importantly, to hold him *accountable* to heed Paul's appeal.

Paul usually follows his greetings with an expression of thankfulness and prayer (read vv.4-7).

1. Even though he is in *prison*, Paul has heard a *good report* about his friend Philemon, and it makes him *thankful* and *prayerful*. (Perhaps his update came from *Epaphras* (Col 1:7,8) and maybe even *Onesimus*...)
2. Here is what Paul has heard (5): Philemon is a man of *love* and *faith*.
 - a. The structure of **v.5** is kind of interesting: “*chiasmus (chiastic) - X.*”
 - i. Philemon’s *love* (first) has as its object *all the saints* (end).
 - ii. His *faith* has as *its* object *the Lord Jesus*.
 1. *Faith* in Jesus’ death & resurrection and...
 2. *Faith* to trust Him in His most difficult commands.
 - b. A man of *love* and *faith* is just the kind of guy Paul can count on to *set aside* his pride and *offer forgiveness* to a runaway slave!
3. *Which brings Paul to pray*. In **v.4** the apostle *refers* to praying, in **v.5** he shares his *motivation* to pray, and now in **v.6** he shares his *prayer* (read v.6).
 - a. The grammar and vocabulary of **v.6** is a little *tough to untangle*!
 - b. Paul begins with “*the fellowship (κοινωνεα) of your faith.*”
 - i. The word “*fellowship*” in this context is understood as *the activities of sharing*.
 - ii. Which we can understand to mean that Philemon’s *faith* is *faith in action*.

- c. *Knowledge* will be what *fuel's* Philemon's faith.
 - i. Actually, a *deeper knowledge* (ἐπιγινώσκω) of *every good thing which is in you*.
 - ii. Paul's *prayer* is that Philemon would come to a *deeper understanding* of how God had blessed him.
 - iii. And that *deeper understanding* would fuel a *more active faith*.
 - d. All of which would bring *glory to Christ* (6c; lit. *unto Christ*).
 - e. Paraphrase (6): *I am praying that your works of faith may be fueled by a deeper understanding of God's blessings in you, so that Christ is glorified*.
4. Then (7) Paul returns to his *reason* for praying ("for" – *reason, motivation*), adding to the *motivations* of v.5.
- a. Philemon's *love* for the saints just gives Paul *much joy and comfort!*
 - b. **Read v.7.**
 - i. *Heart* – "inward parts" or "heart affections"
 - ii. *Refreshed* – suggested the idea of a *marching army* that has *stopped to rest*.
 - iii. Philemon has *refreshed the weary and hurting* of God's people. And Paul is *comforted and filled with joy*.

5. Paul's *prayer* (like his *greeting*) is very *intentional*. His *thankfulness* for Philemon's *faithfulness* is leading up to the *favor* Paul is about to ask: *forgive Onesimus*.
- a. Let's ask a few questions about *forgiving* from Paul's prayer:
 - b. What *kind of man* (5) can *forgive* someone who has *disappointed* him...even *disgraced* him?
 - i. A man of genuine *faith* in the Lord Jesus, whose *faith* is evidenced by the way he *obeys* Jesus' commands.
 - ii. A man what an enlarged capacity to *love*. A *love* that *expresses itself toward all the saints*.
 - c. What *good things* (6) has God *put in us* (*done for us*) to help us *forgive* someone who has *offended* us?
 - i. We might think of the *Holy Spirit*, who indwells every Christian, to guide and help them in the Christian life.
 - ii. We might think of the *fruit of the Spirit*; these virtues can be a powerful aid to forgiving (Gal 5): *love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control*.
 - iii. And we must always remember that *we forgive* because *we are forgiven!* This is a repeated principle in Scripture (Eph 4:32): *and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, just as God in Christ has also forgiven you*.
 - d. Paul ends his prayer-report *simply*, but *powerfully* and *persuasively*: "brother"

We are brothers, Philemon, so I'm *praying* for you. We are brothers, please do this *favor* for me.

I think all of Paul's *trouble* to make a *careful appeal* means Onesimus' *fleeing* was done in a way to *deeply offend* Philemon. Perhaps in spite of *kind treatment*. And we can't ignore that this was a *deeply honor driven society*.

Forgiving is a big deal!

Let's sum up today's *principles of forgiveness*.

1. The *greater to lesser* (1). There are *worse* things than *forgiving for Jesus' sake!* You could be *in prison for Jesus' sake*.
2. The need for *accountability* (2). People don't *like* it, but we all *need* it. So Paul put a *spotlight* on his *private appeal* – Philemon's *family* and *church* are waiting to see what their friend will do.
3. *Character* (4-7). Our willingness to forgive is a measure our *godly character* (*faith, love, obedience, mature understanding*).
4. *Divine reciprocity*. I made that term up! *Forgiven people forgive*. I.e., If *you* won't forgive me, *God* won't forgive you!
 - a. **Col 3:12-13:** *So, as those who have been chosen of God, holy and beloved, put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience; bearing with one another, and forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone; just as the Lord forgave you, so must you do also.*

What a *good word* to stop with this morning, beloved: ***just as the Lord forgave you, so must you do also.***

...pray...