

An Introduction to Philemon

Scripture: Philemon verses 1-3

Series: Reconciliation through Forgiveness

1. Introduction –

- a. The book of Philemon is very unique:
- b. It is the shortest of all Paul's writings and it is addressed from prison to an individual.
 - i. The subject matter is hefty:
 1. Paul, pleads for Onesimus, a slave owned by Philemon that had run away from his master.
 - a. Slavery forms the backdrop to our book.
 - b. In this time, slavery was a normal part of life. The Roman society was based upon it.
 - c. Paul's admonition to Philemon forms the basis for the abolition of slavery. It destroyed slavery by changing hearts. There could be no abuse of a slave by a Christian. The Christian is reminded of his slavery to Christ and must reflect upon how he would want Christ to treat him.
 2. Paul begs Philemon to forgive Onesimus and accept him back as more than a slave but to receive him as a brother in Christ. Essentially, Paul is pleading with Philemon that he would completely forgive the offending Onesimus:
 - a. There are two truths in the practicing of said forgiveness that we must diligently consider as a church and as individuals:
 - i. Man is never more like God than when he forgives.
 1. God forgives man while man is a sinner.
 2. Christ forgives from the cross those men that are literally killing Him.
 3. **Jonah 4:2** And he prayed to the LORD and said, “O LORD, is not this what I said when I was yet in my

country? That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster.

- ii. God's forgiveness of us is based on our forgiveness of others.
 - 1. **James 2:13** For judgment is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment.
 - 2. **Matthew 5:7** "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.
 - 3. **Matthew 6:12** and forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.

- c. Let us take a look at what has occurred to prompt this epistle –
 - i. Paul the Apostle had led Philemon to the Lord. Philemon was a wealthy man with many possessions and he used his possession to advance the kingdom of God. The Church met at his home.
 - ii. He was an active member and one with a great reputation.
 - iii. Onesimus who was not a Christian had run away (perhaps stealing from his master in the process).
 - 1. This was a crime punishable by death.
 - iv. Somehow, Paul runs into Onesimus in Rome and Onesimus is converted.
 - v. Onesimus immediately started living a completely different life – being now useful to Paul in the work of the Gospel.
 - 1. There is a truth demonstrated by this transformation. God saves people and then begins the work of transformation.
 - vi. Paul understood that this relationship with these two Brothers had to be restored and Onesimus being the property of Philemon needed to return to his master. Onesimus needed to seek forgiveness and reconciliation.
 - 1. Onesimus returns to His master and subjects himself to great peril –

- a. Roman law gave absolute power over the slave to his master. Philemon could have Onesimus executed for running away.
 - 2. Onesimus had no earthly basis by which to claim forgiveness. He had been unprofitable, a thief, and rebellious causing his master great emotional and financial loss.
 - 3. That Onesimus is willing to come back to Philemon speaks of his genuine faith. He is willing to submit himself to this man and he does not know exactly what will become of Him. However, he is a slave and as such he needed to come back to his master and submit.
- vii. We note here that Paul pleads with Philemon not in an earthly way but in a completely Christian and spiritual manner.
- d. This book is of importance to us because we live in a society that is solely focused on the individual, and it has completely forgotten how to forgive offense.
 - i. Forgiveness is seen as weakness and retaliation as strength.
 - ii. John MacArthur states, “The result is a society filled with bitterness, vengeance, anger, hate, and hostility.”
 - e. Scripturally, what does unforgiveness produce –
 - i. The incarceration of the believer in their past
 - ii. Bitterness – **Hebrews 12:15** See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God; that no “root of bitterness” springs up and causes trouble, and by it many become defiled;
 - iii. An open door for Satan – **Ephesians 4:26-27** Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, (27) and give no opportunity to the devil.
 - iv. A hindrance to fellowship with God – **Matthew 6:14-15** For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, (15) but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.
 - f. Therefore we conclude that although Onesimus was in need of forgiveness, Philemon was in need of forgiving.
 - i. The offended party is also in spiritual danger.

2. Verse 1 – Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, To Philemon our beloved fellow worker
 - a. **Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus** – Paul was imprisoned in Rome for the sake of the gospel. Because he believed in the sovereignty of God, he knew that his imprisonment was for Christ Jesus. God was working His glorious plan in the advancement of the Gospel through Paul’s life. This is why Paul was able to bear such heartache and pain. He knew that all that was happening was within the realm and the control of God.
 - i. Here we note that Paul is suffering for the sake of the Gospel and Philemon is reminded of that fact.
 - b. **...To Philemon our beloved fellow worker** –
 - i. **...beloved** – *agapētos*
 - ii. **...fellow worker** – a term used to indicate men and women that had worked alongside the Apostle in the ministry of the Word and for the sake of Christ’s kingdom.
3. Verse 2 – and Apphia our sister and Achippus our fellow soldier, and the church in your house:
 - a. **...and Apphia our sister and Achippus our fellow soldier** –
 - i. Perhaps the wife and son of Philemon
 - ii. Achippus is called “...our fellow soldier” – This man was active in the front lines of Christianity and was involved in the war for souls at great cost (as a soldier would be).
 1. We are all to be fellow soldiers in the spiritual battle that is raging around us.
 - b. **...and the church in your house** – Philemon was essentially a private letter but the subject matter involved the entire church. They knew of Onesimus and his flight from his owner. If Philemon was to forgive and welcome Onesimus, the church would have to as well.
 - i. There are sins that affect the wellbeing of the entire church although they are committed predominantly against one person.
 - ii. Paul’s heart was that the entire church would forgive and welcome a new member that was repentant for his past actions as an unbeliever.

4. Verse 3 – Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.
 - a. This is the standard greeting employed by Paul in nearly all his epistles.
 - b. **Grace to you** – is the means of salvation. It is God's unmerited favor.
 - i. It is the cross, death, and resurrection of Christ that have procured God's salvific grace in the life of the believer.
 - c. **...and peace** – is the result of that salvation.
 - i. We are no longer at war with God but become His children and His friends.
 - d. **...from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ** – This is an affirmation of the deity of Christ. Here he is presented in equality with God.
 - i. Therefore, Grace and Peace flows from the trinity into our lives as believers. This grace and consequent peace transforms our lives and makes us able to live transformed lives that are pleasing to God. We are able by this same grace to do things that we could not do before we were saved. In the context of this letter, this would include forgiving a person such as Onesimus for we too have been traitorous and unworthy rebels against the rightful cause of Christ.

5. Benediction –

- a. **Mark 11:25** And whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone, so that your Father also who is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses.”

Public Reading of Scriptures

Matthew 18:21-35