

Philemon – Learning to Forgive
(A Study in Forgiving – Part 2)
Philemon vv.8-18
Reading: Genesis 3:7-????

Bethany Baptist Church
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...pray...

Forgiveness is a *big deal* in the Christian faith! No *forgiveness*, no *Christian*!

In fact, the Bible offers approx **75** illustrations about the *importance* of *forgiveness*. Let me give you **ten**; to *forgive* is to...

- ...turn the key, open the cell door, and free the prisoner.
- ...is to write “*nothing owed*” in large letters across a bill.
- ...to pound the court-room gavel and shout, “*not guilty!*”
- ...to shoot an arrow so high and so far it can never be found.
- ...to grant full pardon to a condemned prisoner.
- ...to relax a stranglehold on a wrestling opponent.
- ...to sandblast a wall of graffiti, leaving the wall good as new.
- ...to smash a clay pot into a thousand pieces, so it can never be pieced together again.
- ...to prepare a feast for a wayward son.
- ...is to throw a stone into the bottom of the sea.

Join me in the NT epistle of Philemon; let’s pick up where we left off in v.8 (-18).

Philemon’s slave Onesimus ran away.

Philemon’s dear friend Paul was imprisoned in Rome.

Where did Onesimus wind up....? You guessed it – Rome!

Who did Onesimus find....? You guessed it – Paul! ☺

What happened to Onesimus...? He heard the Gospel and trusted Jesus. New birth!

What did Paul ask of Philemon? To forgive his runaway slave. To accept him.

I've said repeatedly that this letter is about *forgiving*. But now I need to point out something: the word itself, "*forgive*," never appears in Paul's letter!

But Paul's appeal leads up to a similar term that should convince you that *forgiving* is Paul's point. **FF** with me to v.17: *If then you regard me as a partner, **accept** him as you would me.*

You can't *forgive* someone without *accepting* him; without *restoring* him.

So Paul's appeal is carefully constructed to help Philemon understand the necessity and the nature of forgiving.

The ingredients of forgiveness.

- 1. Paul's appeal (vv.8-12)**
- 2. Paul's restraint (vv.13-14)**
- 3. Paul's theology (vv.15-16)**
- 4. Paul's commitment (vv.17-18)**

Paul's appeal.

1. Paul has been *building up* to something, ever since **v.1**! He finally comes to his *point* in **v.10**: "*I **appeal** to you for my child Onesimus....*"
 - a. Onesimus, as you recall, is Philemon's *run-away slave*.
 - b. He's *disrespected, disappointed, and deserted* his master.
 - c. Yet Paul wants Philemon to *forgive* Onesimus!
 - d. **That's a big ask!** Why should Philemon *offer forgiveness* instead of *exacting punishment*?
 - e. Why should **you** forgive when you've been *offended...?*
2. Let's extract Paul's *reasons* for forgiveness from **vv.8-12 (read)**.
 - a. We forgive because it's the *right thing to do!*
 - i. Very simply Paul says (8) that *forgiving is proper*.
 - ii. Remember, beloved, that forgiveness is a part of God's nature. As one writer says, *we are never more like God than when we forgive*.

- b. We forgive because of *love*. We see *love* here on two levels.
- i. First, on the *interpersonal* level. Paul carefully points out that he could have *ordered* Philemon to accept his slave. *Why?* – because Paul is the *Apostle* Paul and Philemon is a *Christian*. Paul had authority over the church and its members.
 - ii. But instead of authority (9) he bases his request on mutual *love* – “yet for **love’s** sake I rather appeal to you...”
 1. And then instead of reminding Philemon of his *apostleship*, Paul reminds him of his *suffering*.
 - a. He is Paul “*the aged*” – Perhaps 60 years by the calendar, but even older by the effects of his suffering (2 Cor 11).
 - b. And, he is Paul, the “*prisoner of Christ Jesus*.”
 - iii. Paul is reminding Philemon of the *deep bond* of Christian love these two men share, strengthened by Philemon’s *sympathy* for the *aged prisoner*.
 - iv. But perhaps he is *also* reminding Philemon of the premier place of *love* in the Christian life. What one writer calls “*the principle of love*.” How should *love* inform our *decisions*.
 1. The **NT** is clear when the decision is to *forgive*!
 2. **1 Cor 13:5** (*Love Chapter*) – *love...does not take into account a wrong suffered. V.13 (summary)– the greatest of these is love.*

- c. We forgive because our offender is a *Christian*.
- i. Paul *announces* his appeal to forgive Onesimus with a *birth announcement* (10)!
 - ii. Somehow the *runaway* had come to Paul in his Roman imprisonment, Paul had *explained* the gospel, and Onesimus was *born again* by the grace of God!
 - iii. He is now Paul's *child* in the faith. And Philemon's *brother*! (Come to think of it (19), Paul had once led Philemon to Jesus!)
- d. We forgive because of *hope* - because a *reborn man* is a *new man*.
- i. What if the person who has *offended* you *is* a brother/sister in Christ...?
 - ii. The apostle claims in v.11 that because Onesimus is now *born again*, he is *radically changed*!
 - iii. Do you know what "*Onesimus*" means....? It means "*useful*." Paul indulges in a little *word-play* in **v.11 (read)**....
 - iv. Onesimus, *despite* his name, used to be *useless* (no one knew that better than his master!). But as Paul can testify, his conversion has *changed everything*!
 - v. He is now truly *useful* (*truly* Onesimus!), and *both men* could make use of him.

- e. We forgive because *others are involved*.
 - i. Paul is *walking a tightrope*. He urges *forgiveness* but won't play the "*apostle card*" (8,9). In fact, he wanted to *keep* Onesimus in Rome, but knows that might be *over-reach* (14).
 - ii. Paul's *regard (love)* for this slave is *all over this text!* And Paul carefully but repeatedly uses his love to *argue for forgiveness*.
 - iii. Look at v.12: *I am sending him back. You therefore receive him, that is, he who is my own heart.* It got me to thinking...
 - iv. When someone offends you, other people might be *watching* and *caring*. Surely someone *loves* your offender.
 - 1. The *Apostle Peter (denier)* had a wife.
 - 2. The *Prodigal Son* surely had a mother at home.
 - 3. This *runaway slave* had Paul in his corner.
 - v. When you are wrestling with *forgiving*, remember that your offender is undoubtedly *loved by someone*. Someone who would appreciate your *gracious, accepting spirit*.
3. ***Why forgive...?*** *Rejecting* is easier than accepting. *Revenge* feels better (for the moment) than restoration. ***Why forgive...?*** Because it's the *right thing to do*, because *love forgives*, because of *hope*, because forgiveness covers a *multitude of sin* and might give comfort to a *lot of people*.

Paul's restraint (read vv.13-14). Here are a few *insights* into sincere forgiveness.

4. Paul *gave birth* to Onesimus (figuratively speaking!) and apparently immediately *put him to work* (11, 13)!
 - a. The *useless runaway* turned out to be a *useful guy*!
 - b. In fact, Paul wanted to *keep* him in Rome.
 - i. Maybe just *keep* Onesimus and *send* Tychicus back to Colossae with a *letter* of explanation and a *payment* for damages.
 - ii. Something like (13): “since *you* can't be here to help me, your slave is working *on your behalf*! **Thanks!!!**”
5. But Paul decides against *presuming* on Philemon's willingness. Forgiveness has to be *Philemon's choice*. V.14 – *Of your own free will*.
6. Some teachers believe that Paul is *hinting* that Philemon should *reconcile* with Onesimus, then *send him back to Rome* to help Paul.
 - a. But **v.22** argues *against* that – Paul is looking forward to being released from imprisonment and *visiting* Philemon in his Colossian home.
7. This insight is **not** another *reason* to forgive, rather it concerns the *nature* of forgiveness. Forgiveness must be *uncoerced* and forgiveness is *precious*.
 - a. Sincere forgiveness is *freely given*, **not coerced**. It is *gracious* – you could not *coerce* God to forgive; He *freely forgives*.
 - b. Sincere forgiveness is *very valuable*. The apostle valued Philemon's *willingness to forgive* over Onesimus' *usefulness* to his ministry.

Paul's personal restraint helps us better understand the *nature* of truly forgiving. Forgiveness is *very valuable*, but you can't be *forced into it*.

Paul's theology of divine providence helps us to see God's hand in our conflicts (read vv.15-16).

1. Do you remember how Joseph *calmed* his trembling brothers: “*you meant it for evil, but **God meant it for good.***”
2. Paul is asking Philemon to see the *hand* of God (“*providence*”) in this difficult circumstance.
 - a. In other words, perhaps God *ordained* Onesimus’ *desertion* .
 - b. Paul’s grammar subtly suggests that *maybe* God has been at work here: “*perhaps*” asks Philemon to consider *providence*; “*was parted from you*” in the passive voice indicates Onesimus was **carried along** in the *divine counsels* of God.
3. Then what would be God’s *purpose!*?! *Why* all this *trouble!*?!
 - a. Note **v.15** carefully: *parted for a while* **but** *received forever*.
 - b. And again, **v.16**: *no longer as a slave, but **more** than a slave – a beloved brother*.
 - c. God *superintended* Onesimus’ *desertion* (mystery!) to result in his *rebirth*, with Paul’s Roman quarters as the *delivery room*, and Paul as the *spiritual mid-wife*.
 - d. Who could have *envisioned* a *lowly slave* running away, *traveling* some **1200** miles, *arriving* in the Empire’s capital city, actually finding the Apostle Paul, and *coming to faith* in Jesus’ death & resurrection!
 - e. That could *only* be God!

4. When Paul writes (16) “*no longer as a slave*” he is **not** suggesting that Philemon *free* Onesimus. The implication is “*no longer a slave **alone**, but **more than a slave.***”
 - a. The slave is still Philemon’s *slave*, but he is also a *beloved brother* (note v.1).
 - b. I think Paul becomes a little *poetic*, a little *emphatic*, here. A *beloved brother*...
 - i. ...***especially to me.*** Paul has already made his love for Onesimus plain.
 - ii. ...***but how much more to you!*** Paul’s wording is a little illogical, but I think he’s simply *driving home a point!*
 - iii. “*This is good news for both of us, but **particularly** for you!*”
 - iv. Now as he serves in your household (*in the flesh*) and in matters of faith (*in the Lord*), Onesimus is now (forever) your *beloved brother*.
 - v. *So forgive him!*
5. The *theology* suggests this: *Onesimus meant it for evil but God meant it for good.*
 - a. The *good* is that Onesimus came to Christ.
 - b. If Philemon will *receive* him, he has *regained* his slave and also *eternally gained* a brother.
6. So consider *this*, the next time someone *offends* you, think *theology*: could God’s hand be in this...? If God *meant it for good*, maybe you should be willing to *accept* God’s plan and *forgive* your *offender*.

Paul's commitment to make things right (read vv.17-18).

1. Paul again *appeals* to Philemon to *forgive* Onesimus. He bases his *appeal* on their deep friendship.
 - a. *If you regard me as a partner* Of course Philemon does!
 - i. They are, after all (1), *beloved* and *fellow workers*.
 - ii. Now Paul uses a new word friendship: *koinanon* (partner); related to the idea of *koinania* – fellowship.
 - iii. Paul and Philemon are *close*!
 - b. **Accept** *him as you would me*.
 - i. As I said at the beginning, “*accept*” is Paul’s synonym for “*forgive*.”
 - ii. How do you *measure* forgiveness....? Paul says measure it by our *partnership* in the gospel. Measure it by our *friendship*.
 1. If Paul were to *somehow, someway, offend* Philemon...
 2. How would Philemon *receive* Paul’s apology? Would he *accept* the apostle back into *fellowship*?
 3. Readily. Gladly. *Completely*.
 - iii. So now, *accept Onesimus as you would me*.

2. Then Paul makes *every effort* to remove *every last roadblock* to forgiveness. He promises *restitution*. **Read v.18.**
- a. The trip from Colossae to Rome was *long* (1200 mi) and would have been *costly*.
 - i. 1st century slaves had a reputation for dipping into their master's till – in Titus 2:10 Paul warned against servants in the church who pilfered from their owners.
 - ii. It seems likely that Onesimus had *funded* his escape by visiting Philemon's cash drawer – after hours!
 - b. In addition, the *loss of a slave* may have forced Philemon to *buy* a replacement for Onesimus.
 - c. So Paul pledges to *make things right*; to *pay restitution* for any damages caused by Onesimus.
 - i. *Charge that to may account* – timeless business vernacular!
 - ii. I find it interesting that Philemon seems *wealthy*, and Paul is *prisoner*!
 - iii. Yet *forgiveness* means so much to Paul that the *poorer* will pay the *richer*!
 - iv. *Charge that to may account* – that's not an idle boast. If restitution is required Paul will get it done!
 - v. *Peak ahead* to v.19 – “*I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand, I will repay it.*”
 1. Paul has *reached* across the table, *taken* the pen from the hand of his amanuensis, and *scribbled* his *binding signature* on the letter.
 2. “*I will repay it.*”

Forgiveness is a *big deal* in the Christian faith! Beloved, if God did not forgive, you would still be under His just wrath!

And then there's *this*: because God forgave *you*, He requires that *you* forgive one another.

Col 3:13 – *bearing w/ one another, and forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone; just as the Lord forgive you, so also should you.*

Do you hold *grudges*? Do you review *past offenses*? Do you dream of *revenge*?

The Spirit says ***no!*** *Forgive!*

Today we followed Paul's appeal to *forgive....to accept.*

Here are his *reasons*:

1. Forgiveness is the right thing to do (*proper*).
2. Forgiveness is the fruit of love. 1 Cor 13: *Love does not take into account a wrong suffered.*
3. Forgiveness is extended to the family of faith (other believers). Paul *upped the ante* by announcing that Onesimus had become a Christian!
4. Forgiveness is fueled by hope. When you forgive a Christian you have hope that he/she has truly returned to the narrow path and will bear fruit for the Kingdom.
5. Forgiveness touches many people. Paul felt deeply about Onesimus. You offender has family, friends, church?; they will be blessed by your gracious acceptance of their repentant loved one.

I encourage each of you to join me in praying for a forgiving spirit.

...pray...

His Mercy Is More