

**Subject: *The Duty and Privilege of Christian Forgiveness***

**Scripture: *Philemon 1:1-7***

This is one of Paul's letters or epistles, but it is more like a brief note. It is one of the shortest books in the Bible (only 25 verses), and it is also one of the most personal. This inspired letter reminds us that God uses and blesses handwritten letters, notes, and cards, especially ones written to seek forgiveness and reconciliation with people who have been hurt. It is a wonderful example of the reconciliation and forgiveness that should take place in Christ.

The ancient world had plenty of barriers and man-made walls (male and female, Jew and Gentile, rich and poor, masters and slaves). This short letter was written by Paul to his brother in Christ and friend, Philemon, about a runaway slave named Onesimus. Jesus is in the demolition business and He is also in the construction business. He works in the heart to tear down walls between people and then build bridges through forgiveness.

**1. Paul's praise for Philemon (vs. 1-7)**

Paul begins by introducing himself and greeting the readers. This is one of Paul's four personal letters along with 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus. It was a letter sent to Philemon, but it was also meant to be read to the church meeting in Philemon's house (vs. 2). This would hold Philemon accountable to do what Paul is asking him, and at the same time, it would teach the church a valuable lesson in forgiveness and brotherly love. Apphia was probably Philemon's wife and Archippus was probably his son.

We know that Paul was a prisoner when he wrote this letter (vs. 1, 9, 10, 13, 23). This is classified as one of his prison epistles along with Ephesians, Philippians, and Colossians. He was not just a prisoner of the Roman government, but he was mainly a prisoner of Jesus Christ. Everything in life has a purpose when you serve Christ. Paul has nothing but praise for Philemon. He mentions three specific things:

A. Philemon's love and faith toward the Lord Jesus (vs. 5, 6)

Philemon demonstrated real faith by the way he lived. His faith was communicated (made known) effectively by recognizing every good thing that Christ had put in him. The church was meeting in his home. Churches did not have church buildings until the third century. Until then, they met in small groups inside homes.

B. Philemon's love and faith toward all saints (vs. 5)

Love is mentioned six times in this short letter. Does Christian love really work? Does it work in the worst of circumstances? Does it work between a prominent slave owner and a runaway slave? Paul believes that Christian love can work and will work.

C. Philemon's ministry of refreshing the saints (vs. 7)

Paul speaks of "the bowels" which literally means "the inner parts." We would say "the hearts" of the saints. Philemon was a person who refreshed others. We should be a blessing, and not a burden to others. Some people you have known, instead of being the wind beneath

your wings, they are the anchor on your boat. Instead of building you up, they bring you down. Are you refreshing the people around you?

## **2. Paul's plea for Onesimus (vs. 8-17)**

Paul had authority as an apostle, but he doesn't use it. He is not overbearing, but tactful and courteous. A true test of character is how a person treats people who are "under" them. Paul makes an appeal for Onesimus, who has been saved while in Rome (vs. 10). Apparently Onesimus ran away from Philemon his owner and thought he could hide out in Rome, but God found him. He set up a divine appointment with the apostle Paul. In verse 11, Paul says that Onesimus (means "useful") is now truly useful because he is now saved. Every believer should be useful. In his plea to Philemon on behalf of this runaway slave, Paul was willing to do three things: he was willing to identify with Onesimus (vs. 12); he was willing to intercede for him (vs. 12, 17); and he was willing to invest in him (vs. 18). Paul based his plea for Philemon to receive Onesimus, the runaway slave, on three things:

- A. He based his plea on Philemon's love and goodness
- B. He based his plea on Philemon's new relationship to Onesimus
- C. He based his plea on Onesimus' new life in Christ

*2 Corinthians 5:17 Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new.*

## **3. Paul's promise to Philemon (vs. 18-19)**

Paul promised to pay back to Philemon whatever Onesimus owed him. He says, "You have my word on it." Paul then gently reminds Philemon that he owes a debt to him (vs. 19).

## **4. Paul's peace and positive outlook (vs. 20-22)**

Paul is confident that Philemon will grant his request and do even more than he asks. He is also confident that he will be released and will see Philemon again face to face.

## **5. Paul's partners in ministry (vs. 23-25)**

All of them served with him, and one of them now suffered in prison with him. As we read the Bible we are constantly reminded how much we need one another. There is no such thing as "lone ranger" Christianity.

## **6. Paul's picture of Christian forgiveness**

This entire letter is a wonderful picture of Christian forgiveness. It describes forgiveness without ever using the word itself. This letter has been called "The ABCs of Christian Forgiveness." Paul's letter illustrates many truths about salvation and the Christian life:

- A. This letter pictures every guilty sinner – We are guilty and out of fellowship with God, like Onesimus was.

- B. This letter pictures Christ – He is the mediator who pleads for us and pays the debt we could not pay, like Paul did.
- C. This letter pictures regeneration – (vs. 10) “begotten” (the new birth)
- D. This letter pictures repentance – (vs. 11) Onesimus was a changed man. The un-useful man has now become useful. The runaway slave is now a returning and reliable slave.
- E. This letter pictures reconciliation – (vs. 12, 17) “receive him” (Gk. *proslambanomai*, accept, welcome)
- F. This letter pictures providence – (vs. 15) God’s providence turns negative things into positive things and temporary failures into eternal blessings.
- G. This letter pictures imputation – (vs. 18-19) Imputation is the principle by which we are justified. There are three verbs in verse 18. The first two (wronged, owes) describe Onesimus’ sin. The last verb (put that to my account) describes Paul’s commitment to pay the debt. Imputation means that Christ’s righteousness is credited to us and He pays our debt in full. J. Vernon McGee said: “We have the standing of Christ before God or we have none at all.”
- H. This letter pictures Christian forgiveness of others – God shows us how to forgive others who have done us wrong and how to receive new believers in the church regardless of their background. **Romans 15:7** *Wherefore receive ye one another, as Christ also received us to the glory of God.*