

The Results of Forgiveness

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Date: 23 May 2016

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[0:00] Well, we're going to finish up our study of the book of Philemon tonight.

In both biblical and secular history, there are tremendous examples of forgiving spirits. By far the greatest example is the Lord Jesus Christ.

! As we all know, He was unjustly condemned. He hung on a cross in a Jerusalem sky, and He asked the Father to forgive those who were at that moment carrying out His execution.

Stephen, the first martyr of the church age while being murdered, and by the way, unjustly, asked the Lord to not hold that sin against His executioners.

And so profound was Stephen's forgiving spirit that I am convinced it was burned into the mind of one of his killers, Saul of Tarsus, later to be known as the Apostle Paul.

[1:25] I'm personally of the opinion that Paul never forgave himself in this life for participating in the murder of Stephen.

And you know, he says, I'm unworthy to be an apostle. I murdered, persecuted believers of the first century church. And often Paul would say, you know, that he was not worthy to be called an apostle.

In secular history, we have Sir Thomas More. He was the Lord Chancellor of England.

Unfortunately, he ruled under Henry VIII.

And he was unjustly condemned to death by the very men with whom he had served honorably and with whom he was best friends.

These are the very men that condemned him. And at his sentencing, the judge asked him if he had anything to say. And he said this, kind of in old English.

[2:32] As the blessed Apostle St. Paul, as we read in the Acts of the Apostles, was present and consented to the death of St. Stephen, and kept their clothes that stoned him to death, and yet be they now both twain Holy Spirits in heaven, Paul and Stephen, and shall continue their friends forever.

So I verily trust, and shall therefore right heartily pray, that though your lordships have now on earth been judges to my condemnation, we may yet hereafter in heaven merrily all meet together to our everlasting salvation.

Quite a statement to the guys that condemned him to death. And he's going to be let out to be executed. Paul closes his letter to Philemon by giving insight to the motives for forgiveness.

And on the one hand, he's trying to bring to his friend Philemon to the point of forgiving his runaway slave.

We know that from previous studies. But in a larger sense, Paul was leaving a blueprint for forgiveness that would stand the test of time until Christ Jesus returns.

[4:11] So there's a bigger picture here than something that happened in a brief period of time a couple thousand years ago. And Paul is going to give to Philemon six motives for forgiving.

And these are the same motives that serve as the foundation for Christian forgiveness regardless of the circumstance. And here they are.

The recognition that we all live under the cloud of an unpayable debt. Don't we? That our forgiveness of others is a source of blessing.

That obedience to the commands of Christ requires forgiveness. That we forgive because we are ourselves accountable to God for our forgiveness.

That only through forgiveness can we maintain fellowship. And that forgiveness ultimately depends upon grace. It's not law.

[5:23] It's grace. Well, first of all, we have an unpayable debt. In verse 19 of Philemon, Paul says this, I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand.

I will repay it. In other words, if Onesimus owes Philemon, I think Paul will make it good. And I just love his next statement. He says, Lest I should mention to you that you owe me even your own self as well.

I mean, you talk about putting him in a corner. Philemon, if Onesimus owes you anything, I'll pay it. And you owe me everything. I led you to the Lord.

Paul dictated his letters through the services of a recording secretary. But in this letter, as well as Colossians and 2 Thessalonians, he placed a note at the bottom of the letter in his own handwriting. And it's really like taking a typed letter and adding a postscript with your own pen. And we already know from our last lesson that Paul offered to pay any financial debt owed by the slave Onesimus to his owner, Philemon.

[6:46] Now, there is a possibility, and there's a few vague references to this, that Onesimus may have stolen some money or property when he fled his master.

At the very least, he stole himself. Because in that culture, Philemon owned him and expected service out of him. We studied last time that restitution is an essential ingredient of forgiveness and that Onesimus had no means with which to repay Philemon.

None whatsoever. So, Paul, in essence, is signing an IOU for Onesimus. And it will be up to Philemon whether or not he wants to cash it.

My guess is he didn't. Because he did owe everything to Paul. And then Paul, writing by inspiration, does something that is nothing less than brilliant.

But he reminds Philemon that he owes a greater debt than does his slavery. Onesimus owns Philemon, a debt that will soon pass away.

[8:04] Philemon owns Paul, an eternal debt. Paul had brought the gospel of Christ to Philemon, led him to saving faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

And Philemon can't repay that debt. It can never repay. For what Christ did for him. None of us can repay that debt. And there's a principle at work here.

To whom are you indebted? To whom are you indebted? Who shared the Lord Jesus Christ with you? Maybe it was godly parents.

A wife, a friend. Somewhere along the way, someone felt the need to share the good news of Christ with you. And there was an eternal result.

I had an old Bible. And I listed like 30 names of people over the years that gave me a piece of the gospel. In my case, the Lord didn't have much to work with.

[9:05] He had to keep sending people. And then I got the bright idea that I need to have this rebound. And they tore that page out. I always tear some pages out when you're buying the book.

That disappeared. Of course, the ultimate debt that we owe is to Jesus himself, right? The unpayable debt.

We who owe so much to so many should be quick to forgive anyone who may owe us debt small in comparison.

Having received an unpayable spiritual reward, can we not forgive a temporal debt? It's going to pass away. Another point I would bring up is forgiveness should bring blessing.

Yes, brother. Verse 20. Yes, brother, let me benefit from you in the Lord. Refresh my heart in Christ. Philemon was quick to bless or give benefit to many in his earthly ministry.

[10:16] Remember that for one thing, the church met in his home. Philemon was apparently a very successful man. And the church met in his home.

Paul now asked to receive a blessing or benefit from Philemon. By forgiving Onesimus, Philemon would benefit Paul. If only he will forgive.

It will be a great benefit to Paul. Well, how would it benefit Paul? Because Paul would know first, Philemon would be doing it in the Lord. In the Spirit of Christ, in the name of the Lord.

His forgiveness would be an expression of obedience. Because we're all asked to forgive. His forgiveness would reveal his deep love for the church.

And this was going to be a great benefit in terms of a godly example. No doubt there were many in that church that were babies in Christ.

[11:23] And others that were not yet saved and maybe never did get saved. But they were going to visually see this, which was very rare in the Roman Empire. I told you before, he could imprison Onesimus.

He could execute him, have him killed. I mean, the Roman Empire didn't have a lot of patience with runaway slaves. So, this is going to be a tremendous example to the church.

His forgiveness would maintain the unity of the fellowship in the church. And I imagine that church also had slaves. Philemon had more than one slave, I'm sure.

His forgiveness would refresh Paul's heart. He's going to say, you know, boy, I've been discipling Philemon. It's real. It's real. And Paul will be spiritually blessed as a result of all this.

Now, we should remember that the church was watching all of this unfold. People are watching this. And that little congregation that met in the home.

[12:33] I say little, we don't know what size it was. And as always happens, even in the 21st century, the world was watching the church. They want to see what's going to happen here.

Think Philemon will have him executed? Well, I would if I owned him. You know? So, they're going to have a major, major blessing here that's going to be an example not only to the church, but to the world.

The watching world. One major motive of a forgiving spirit is that when it becomes known, it is a blessing to believers, and it can be a witness to unbelievers.

It can be a witness to unbelievers. I was giving an example to a man one time. I'd been run over by some guys when I was police chief.

This guy said to me, well, why didn't you sue him? And I said, well, that wouldn't have been a good Christian example. He said, oh, I've never heard anyone use that terminology.

[13:43] He said, boy, that's honorable. Not that I'm an honorable person, but he thought I was. And ironically, that man was the former Secretary of State of the United States of America. He was on the Phillips board, and I was traveling with him over in Asia.

So, for whatever benefit that might have had. Forgiveness is essential for obedience. Verse 21, having confidence in your obedience, I write to you, since I know that you will do even more than what I say.

Paul had great confidence in Philemon's obedience to the Lord Jesus Christ. He'd seen it. He disciplined him. And he'd seen an unbeliever in the Roman Empire become a believer, open up his home to the church.

Paul reminds Philemon of what he already knew, and that was the necessity of obeying Christ. Then we get a sign, when my alarm goes off, it lights up and it's going to say, obey Christ today. Paul knew this was the very heart of his friend, and Paul had confidence in his response. He probably had more confidence than Philemon had, at least initially, because I imagine Philemon was seething, you know, about all this.

[15:02] I think we can be confident that Philemon understood theology. He had a great teacher, didn't he? The Apostle Paul. Philemon understood the truth taught in Matthew, that our forgiveness from God depends upon our forgiveness of others.

He knew that God places no limits on forgiveness. God never says forgive unless, you never hear that from the Lord, do it. Forgive unless a person has done the following, and then he follows up with a list of atrocious sins committed against you.

Well, if he's done one of these, don't forgive him. Paul's comment that he knows Philemon will do more than Paul asks is very open-ended. Very open-ended.

It may be some or all of the following. A call for the emancipation of Onesimus. A call to welcome Onesimus back, not grudgingly, but with open arms.

This may be a call for Philemon to permit Onesimus to minister alongside him. What an example he would be to the church and what an example both of them together would be.

[16:18] Remember, the slave had just undergone theological training from the greatest theologian on the face of the earth. The Apostle Paul. And he's in Roman custody, so he doesn't have anything else to do, so he could teach Philemon.

Probably in a house in Rome. Probably under house arrest. And Paul may be calling on Philemon to forgive anyone who has wronged him. Because there were probably others.

So he's given Philemon quite a lesson in godly forgiveness. Philemon, like us, is to forgive not because of the law or out of fear.

He is to forgive out of his love and obedience directed toward the Lord. It is, after all, the Lord who commanded him and us to forgive.

To forgive. I have a great ability to forgive. I always have that. I can't think of anyone on this earth I can't forgive except myself.

[17 : 28] I have a hard time forgiving myself when I do some stupid sin. I know you guys are all above that, but I still do it. I'm about the only person I have trouble forgiving.

But I do take it to the Lord. 1 John 1.9 And then let's talk about accountability. This is probably the most important topic and perhaps least understood.

Paul speaks here of accountability. Verse 22 and at the same time also prepare me a lodging for I hope through your prayers I shall be given to you Paul expected to be and eventually was released from his first imprisonment by the Roman authorities he asked Philemon prepare me a lodging because I'm very soon going to visit you my friend so he's been asking him all along you know forgive forgive forgive restore restore by the way I'm coming to visit you know so Philemon said wow he's going to actually be here and I'm going to give an account can you imagine how awkward it would be for Paul to request Philemon to forgive Onesimus pay him a visit only to learn that Philemon had said no I'm not forgiving him by the way Paul he's in prison or by the way he's been executed that's awkward Paul had even been asking Philemon to pray for his release so that he could come visit him praying for his release

Paul understood that the sovereignty of God works his purposes through prayer that's always an amazing thing to me God is absolutely sovereign he requires us demands us commands us to pray to pray I like what Dr. Swindoll said does prayer change God? No it changes us you know it changes us Philemon could hardly pray for Paul's release if he hadn't forgiven Onesimus if he doesn't pray for his release the Romans might hold on to Paul Paul had placed Philemon in a spiritual corner he can only extricate himself by forgiving Onesimus this is spiritual accountability at work at the highest level Paul's coming for a visit hey Philemon where's Onesimus?

in the larger sense we will all one day appear before the Lord every one of us can you imagine Jesus saying I forgave you why didn't you forgive your brother?

[20 : 32] I forgave you understanding and acknowledging that accountability is a powerful incentive to forgive those who've wronged us it's a very powerful incentive because we've been forgiven what about forgiveness for the sake of fellowship?

Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus greets you as do Mark Aristarchus, Demas, Luke my fellow workers there really are no true hermits in the body of Christ none of us are to live our Christian life in a vacuum we are to separate ourselves from the world but not from each other we do not operate independent of the fellowship never forsake the gathering together of yourselves in the church the Lord is indwelling every one of us but there's something unique when the church comes together to worship and praise the Lord there's something very unique and strong there and I personally think that in communion the Lord especially visits his church I really believe that but we're not independent of each other in fellowship Paul names members of the fellowship and in doing so reminds Philemon that he is accountable to them all he's accountable to them failing to forgive

Onesimus would disappoint them all and send the wrong signal to the church much was at stake here we are also to have a forgiving spirit much is at stake here in the 21st century as well when we fail to forgive one another we disrupt the fellowship and can cause godly or church discipline to fall upon us and then as he often does Paul ends his letter with a very powerful note of grace the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit there is no doubt in my mind that Philemon is under deep conviction to forgive Onesimus if he had any doubts as to where he could find the strength and source of that forgiveness Paul reminds him what the source is with his closing words Philemon can forgive Onesimus because of the grace of God whoever is wronged you and there are some brothers here that have been wronged we've talked about that whoever has wronged you or is presently wronging you forgiveness can be found in the grace of God you're a recipient of grace so you can then extend grace

Paul asked Philemon to exercise the same grace with which the Lord Jesus forgave him and boy that's powerful so how does it all end well I think we can be sure that Philemon forgave Onesimus I'm absolutely confident of that if he didn't this letter I don't think would have ended up in the canon of scripture I don't think it would have been included I don't think the spirit of God would have included half a century goes by and we find the church father Ignatius in Smyrna I've been there by the way on his way to be martyred he wrote a closing letter to the church in Ephesus in it he said these words I received your large congregation in the person of Onesimus your pastor in this world

a man whose love is beyond words now that begs the question this is one of the church fathers talking about a pastor named Onesimus could that be the same
Onesimus well first of all I can't imagine two mothers naming a kid guy Onesimus but it could well be we can't be dogmatic he would be quite old by then but if it is one and the same man what a testimony to the forgiveness of Philemon and an even greater testimony to the forgiveness of God what a great testimony during the Civil War and the years leading up to the Civil War in the mid 1800s there was a black slave you can actually read his sermons on the internet never had a day schooling but he was such a powerful preacher slaves walked for miles to hear him and white people started coming finally his owner freed him with the stipulation
[25 : 55] I'm freeing you so that you can be free to preach the gospel and that's what he did and I've read some of his sermons that survived powerful he was forgiven he was released freed so he could be a slave to Christ Paul is a slave to Christ Onesimus a slave to Christ Philemon a slave to Christ and you know what they're all together as we talk here they're all together Thank you.