

The Power to Forgive

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[0:00] The book of Philemon is about forgiveness.

It's interesting that the word forgiveness does not even appear in the book. That's the thing. And Paul doesn't really build on any doctrinal principles in this book or legal principles.

But he's going to lay a foundation for forgiveness. Without doing that, he's going to make his appeal based upon love.

That's going to be the foundation that Paul's going to lay for forgiveness. Paul knew Philemon pretty well. Very well. Evidence that he led him to the Lord.

Discipled him. He knew that he was a godly man. He knew that he had a heart that was right with God. As a believer, he knew that the Spirit of God had taken up residence in Philemon.

[1:15] And he knew that the Holy Spirit was working in him, revealing truth. Now, we don't really know where Philemon was when this was written as far as his walk with the Lord.

But I think there's every reason to assume from the text that he was a mature believer. Who, for instance, he had opened up his home and was the host to the local church.

They met in his house. He was deeply concerned for the salvation of souls and for the discipling and maturing of the saints. How deep an understanding Philemon had of the doctrine of forgiveness is not made clear to us in this brief one chapter book.

But I can almost guarantee you that he knew more about the theological principles of forgiveness than I do. And maybe than a few of you do.

So he understood where Paul was coming from. Dr. MacArthur lists a number of elements that make up the doctrine of forgiveness.

[2:34] And the first he points out that during his earthly ministry, the Lord Jesus expanded on the meaning, the Old Testament meaning of forgiveness.

And we know, of course, that when Jesus walked on the earth, the only inspired book there was, was the Old Testament. New Testament hadn't been written yet. But the Lord expanded on the meaning that it held in the Old Testament pages.

For instance, there is a command in Exodus. We've all heard it before. That prohibits murder. Thou shalt not murder.

And that's what it says in the Hebrew language. The Lord said, when he expanded it or made commentary on that commandment, said, there is a prohibition based on the commandment not to murder that included anger, hate, malice, vengeance, and the lack of forgiveness.

So the Lord placed under the banner of prohibiting murder all of those things. And the Lord obviously took forgiveness to a much higher level than did the Jew who had lived for 1600 years under the Old Covenant, under the Old Testament.

[4:06] He took it to a whole new level. And another principle that was at work here has to do with our proper understanding of sin.

And I'm an authority on sin, of course, being the chief of sinners. All sin is ultimately against God. All sin is ultimately against God.

If someone offends you greatly, he may have committed a sin against you. But in a greater sense, his act is ultimately a sin against God.

And this really comes home to us when we use King David as the great example there. We all know that David entered into an adulterous affair with Bathsheba.

He sinned against her. He sinned against her husband, who I have high regard for. He sinned against his own family. And as king, he sinned against the nation of Israel.

[5:08] All that encompassed by his, what we call a triest with Bathsheba. But David, in the great psalm of repentance, Psalm 51, verse 4 says to God, when David cries out, Against thee, thee only,

have I sinned and done what is evil in thy sight.

Whatever our offenses are against men, the greater offense is always against God. No one could ever offend us at the level that we have offended God.

Yet God has mercifully forgiven us. And if God has forgiven we who have sinned against him, then it begs the question, can we not forgive those who have committed lesser offenses against us?

And I trust the answer there is yes. There's another principle at work here. If we fail to forgive others, we will not enjoy the forgiveness that we need from God.

And the Lord is very clear on that point. It always pains me here because I had relatives that could not find it in our heart to forgive other relatives in our family. And they're gone. I'm the last surviving member of my generation.

[6:43] The generation before me is gone. Matthew chapter 6, verses 14 and 15, If you forgive men for their transgressions, your heavenly Father will also forgive you.

But if you do not forgive men, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions. That's pretty powerful. That's powerful. That's in the Sermon on the Mount.

That's a powerful two verses of Scripture. We risk, at the very least, the chastening of the Lord if we fail to forgive others.

Now I told you last week, someone breaks into your home, murders your family, forgiveness doesn't mean you go down to the jail because I'm going to solve that crime for you. Actually, my detectives are.

It doesn't mean you go down and say, hey, what you did is okay with me. That's not what we're talking about. Forgiveness may be you coming to the point where you say, God, I can't deal with this. I'm going to give him to you.

[7:46] It's going to kill me by not being able to go kill him. So I'm going to let you handle it. That may be the level of forgiveness that we get to.

But we risk the chastening of the Lord when we just say, I will not forgive so and so. And a lack of forgiveness brings with it a very high price to pay.

Either not forgiven by God, meaning we're lost, or the chastening of God, disciplining and scourging as a son. Believers who do not forgive will not enjoy fellowship with the Lord.

1 John's founded on that. About fellowship with the Lord. If an unforgiving spirit disrupts our fellowship with the Lord, then our fellowship with each other will be negatively impacted.

It will just have a negative impact on us. And such unforgiveness hinders the proper operation of the church. If we are in a season of unforgiveness, that has tremendous impact.

[9:00] On the church. We went through a real church problem in the early 80's. We had people that weren't talking to one another. And I know because some of them weren't talking to me. And I wasn't talking much to them.

Finally, Ed Saucier came in and he preached sermons on forgiveness and he got us all back. I'll never forget this one guy. I'll tell you his name when we're over. But he came up and he said, I just want you to know that I forgive you for the terrible things you did.

I said, well, thank you. We see each other now and we're brothers. If rather than forgiving those who transgress against us, we seek revenge, we stand guilty of usurping the very authority of God. He said vengeance belongs to Him. Now, I don't think we can be like the one guy that said, I'm okay with that as long as God hurries and lets me watch. I don't think that's the right spirit either.

But we don't want to usurp the authority of God. I remember W.A. Criswell, Dr. Criswell from First Baptist Dallas said never touch the glory of God. Well, part of that was when we usurp His authority.

[10:16] God is infinitely more capable in dealing with offenses against us than we are through the channel of revenge.

God is much wiser in how to do that. He has a complete understanding of the situation. His understanding is far superior to our own feeble understanding.

By failing to forgive, we risk taking the sword of divine judgment out of God's hands and that's where it rightly belongs, right?

And trying to wield it ourselves. And that only compounds us. And you know, there was a movie years ago, a fictional deal. It wasn't Christian based. These guys were hunters.

And they were out hunting and somehow one of them's wife, I don't remember the movie exactly, but one of them's wife was there and this guy in this red-clad shirt assaulted her physically and killed her.

[11:36] So they were out in the woods looking for this guy and they saw the red-clad shirt thing and the husband took his deer rifle and shot and killed him. Well, he didn't kill the murderer, he killed a brain surgeon who was out hunting with his friends.

And I mean, just think of all the people that guy would have touched in his life that 40-year-old brain surgeon because the guy took that in his own hands. I don't know why I threw that in, but it's not in the nose.

Vengeance belongs to the Lord. God is very clear that He owns vengeance and He will repay. He will repay. And it's just best to leave vengeance to Him.

There's another principle here. This is my introduction, by the way. The lesson is easy and short if you get through the introduction. There's another principle at work here.

An unforgiving spirit makes us unfit for worship. If you come into church and you've got 14 people there that you won't forgive, it's going to be real hard for you to worship.

[12:47] The Lord spoke of this in the Sermon on the Mount. Matthew 5, 23 and 24. Therefore, if you are presenting your offering at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your offering there before the altar and go, first be reconciled to your brother and then come and present your offering.

And it's interesting, the language there says if you know somebody's got something against you, they haven't forgiven you for something, go to them and be reconciled. And the interesting thing about forgiveness and reconciliation is that either party can initiate it.

I've known a lot of people that say, well, I'm just waiting for him to ask me to forgive. I'll probably do it, but he hadn't asked yet. Well, scripturally, either party can initiate it. Regardless of the circumstance, we should always, always, always seek reconciliation.

Now, what Dr. O'Brien used to say, keep short accounts with God. Well, we need to keep short accounts with our brothers too. If we're in this situation, get it over with quickly.

Now, Jesus even told us to love our enemies. And when he said that, that was revolutionary in that culture. That was foreign to the Jewish mindset.

[14:18] They prayed to you every morning, said, thank you God that I'm not a slave, a Gentile, or a woman. Forgiveness and loving your enemies was foreign to the Jews.

You love your friends, you kill your enemies. Let me give you one last principle so we can get into our lesson. Forgive even those if it has not been sought.

Forgive them even if they haven't asked you. Jesus asked the Father to forgive those murdering Him. Those Roman soldiers and the Jewish leadership didn't go to Jesus and say, please forgive us.

Ask the Father to forgive us. Jesus took that initiative even while they were murdering Him.

Stephen, the first martyr of the church age, did the same thing.

He paralleled Christ. Which brings me to the text for the day. Philemon, verse 10 and following. I appeal to you for my child...

[15:25] Now, Paul's writing to Philemon about Onesimus. I appeal to you for my child... And he was a grown man, but he's a child of the faith.

For my child Onesimus, whom I have begotten in my imprisonment, meaning he led him to the Lord, who formerly was useless to you, but now is useful both to you and to me.

I have sent him back to you in person, that is, sending my very heart whom I wish to keep with me so that on your behalf he might minister to me in my imprisonment for the gospel.

But without your consent, I did not want to do anything so that your goodness would not be in effect by compulsion, but of your own free will.

That's just packed full there. We could spend a lot of time there. Let's go through the whole summary on that section. According to God's plan of forgiveness, we are to be receptive to bringing back one who has offended us.

[16:47] And the grounds for Philemon forgiving his slave and the slave that had offended him are threefold.

First of all, Onesimus was repentant. He was repentant. Second, Onesimus had been transformed by the power of Christ.

And third, he had proven himself faithful. Now, what about repentance? How do we know he was repentant? The proof of his repentance is grounded in the fact that Onesimus was standing in front of his owner while Philemon was reading the letter addressed to him.

Onesimus showed up. Onesimus had returned even though Philemon had the power to punish him severely and under Roman law even take his life.

I mean, Onesimus traveling back from Rome at every step he's got to be thinking he's going to kill me. You know, he has the right to kill me. When Onesimus returned to Philemon he stood there as a spiritual offspring of Paul.

[18:11] And Philemon understood that. Well, Onesimus had been transformed. He left a runaway slave. He came back a brother in Christ. He had been transformed.

The slave that ran away was not the slave that was returning. technically still a slave but he was changed. When Onesimus fled he became useless.

Absolutely useless. Now he is useful both to Philemon and to Paul. Well, what made the difference? He who is light and that's capital L had transformed Onesimus from darkness to light.

the Lord Jesus had come into his life. That's what made the difference. Onesimus was faithful. He was faithful.

He had captured Paul's heart and Paul desired now that he would also capture the heart of Philemon. Paul wished there had been some way that he could have kept Onesimus with him.

[19:23] And that was important in the Roman world when you were in prison. He had proven to be very helpful to the Apostle Paul while Paul was in prison.

Whether he was in a prison cell or under house arrest we're not 100% sure. Prisoners of Rome they couldn't Rome didn't serve three meals a day.

You had to have some on the outside to Confucius. And Paul was blessed to have Onesimus and another fellow Epaphroditus who ministered to their needs. He came from the Philippian church.

And he was needful of them while he was incarcerated. But Paul knew that something had to happen in the great sequence of forgiveness.

He couldn't just write Philemon a letter and say hey it's okay Onesimus is with me now. That wouldn't suffice. See there's another step here that has to have happened between Onesimus and Philemon.

[20:33] Onesimus had to be restored. Absolutely crucial. And you can bet there were a lot of people watching this thing unfold. Unbelievers and believers in the church that met at Philemon's home.

verse 15 and 16 for perhaps he was for this reason separated from you for a while.

By the way if I don't get that in now that's talking about the sovereignty of God. That God's in this picture super intending.

Perhaps that's why he was separated from you for a while. That you would have him back forever. And then he adds this that's just really precious.

No longer as a slave but more than a slave a beloved brother especially to me but how much more to you both in the flesh and in the Lord.

[21:38] Paul asked two things of his friend Philemon. First he says Philemon welcome your slave back.

Welcome him back. And then he says to Philemon restore him to service. Let there be restoration. Now this is not an issue of the guilt of Onesimus.

He was guilty. He had committed a crime. He committed a crime against Rome. Actually committed a crime against God because he stole what he stole from Philemon.

His services. His services. He was guilty. All three parties here Paul, Philemon, and Onesimus himself knew this.

But Paul knew that God was at work here. He was superintending over everything that was transpiring. And Paul suggests that God's sovereignty and God's providence may have been responsible for taking his slave away in the first place.

[22:52] Because God's teaching a tremendous principle here. I said when our third lesson we get one more in the first lesson and there's some controversy on this. But I suggest that Philemon, the book of Philemon is the death of slavery.

Particularly among Christian brethren. You can't, a Christian man can't own a Christian man. Now they tried it in the south and I come from the south and we were slave owners.

But that, under scripture you can't do it. A Christian man can't own a Christian man. There are times when we cannot see the secret providence of God at work.

And God's always working. He never slumbers. And things might get mighty dark before God sheds light on the matter. And let me say this, it is possible that the darkness may endure for a lifetime and not even be lifted until glory.

And then everything will be brought into the light. Something evil had occurred here. Onesimus as a runaway slave was guilty of a crime.

[24 : 13] But remember that God can and does use every circumstance that we find ourselves in and in the end he can bring good results from it.

He can bring good results from it. Paul wrote that in 8th chapter Romans. All things work together for good. Not everything is good, but they work together under the sovereignty of God to work of good.

God always triumphs over sin. Always. And he does that by his providence but he also does that by his grace. This reminds me of the great hymn by William Calpers and by the way the proper pronunciation of that is Cooper.

John from Durham brought that up. But it's spelled Calpers and I'm going to call him Calpers until we get to heaven. He wrote the hymn God moves in a mysterious way. Judge not the Lord by feeble sense but trust him for his grace.

Behind a frowning providence he hides a smiling face. That really spoke to my heart. God not only takes the circumstances of life and works them for good, but he does so to accomplish his own purposes.

[25 : 33] He's always at work. In the present example Onesimus left temporarily, made his way all the way to Rome and then came back to Philemon apparently for the rest of his life.

And technically or actually we can say of truth forever. He returned to Philemon forever. We're sitting here in the 21st century and right now Philemon and Onesimus are together as we are sitting here in this classroom this evening.

You ever thought of that? They're together. Philemon and Onesimus are together forever. In eternity. Also bear in mind that Onesimus left us a slave, but by God's grace he returned a brother in Christ.

You know that tells me there's hope for all of us. He returned a brother in Christ. Pretty amazing. It's interesting to me to note here that Paul never asked Philemon to free a slave.

He never asked him to free him. He does something greater than emancipation. He urges Philemon to receive his slave back as a dear brother in Christ.

[27 : 00] As a dear brother in Christ. He had already become that to Paul. He was a brother. He was a son in the faith. Philemon would enjoy Onesimus at a level that was never thought of before this.

They both had the redemptive blood of Christ in common. They would henceforth worship and minister together for the cause of Christ and they do so in the home of Philemon because that's where the church met.

You see how this whole relationship has been transformed by the Spirit of God? Christ came in he who is the light and Philemon actually receives here a double portion because he had back a very useful slave and he had back a dear brother to share the good news and minister to others but there's something else that had to be done there must be restitution there must be restitution restitution is going to be paid Philemon is out he's out financially and other things well Paul handles that in verse 17 and 18 if then he's talking to Philemon Paul says if then you regard me a partner accept him as you would me well that's pretty powerful and then

Paul says but if he has wronged you in any way or owes you anything and he did charge that to my account wow those are great words send me the bill Philemon you think he ever sent him a bill send me the bill I'll make restitution now there's no question that Philemon had been wronged by the flight of Onesimus at the very least Philemon was out both money and service and it was a costly adventure to say the least it is possible and some theologians have suggested this that Philemon had to purchase another slave to replace the absent Onesimus so he had a double bill there he bought

Onesimus and now he had to buy another one he was out money on both of them some writers have suggested that in order to finance his trip to Rome Onesimus may have actually stolen money from Philemon that was the way he financed his escape the Bible teaches that restitution must be made in such a case Numbers 5 verse 6 and 8 speak to the sons of Israel when a man or woman commits any of the sins of mankind acting unfaithfully against the Lord and that person is guilty then

he shall confess his sins which he has committed and he shall make restitution in full for his wrong and add it to one fifth of it and give it to him whom he is wrong but if the man has no relative to whom restitution may be made for the wrong the restitution which is made for the wrong must go to the

[30 : 37] Lord for the priest besides the ram of atonement by which atonement is made for him obviously under the old covenant written about in numbers now you can say well that's really an obscure Old Testament passage to use here but that's what was operative in the time frame we're talking about the New Testament had not been written yet but one thing was absolutely certain Onesimus could never repay his master for the crime that he had committed could not repay he had probably not even found employment in Rome giving him time to serve Paul and Paul uses here a powerful argument for Philemon to consider he asked his friend to accept Onesimus just as if he were accepting Paul himself Paul was a partner with

Philemon in the faith and he's teaching him a lesson if you give him a chance Onesimus will be our partner as well so Philemon is at the crossroads it would be right to demand restitution from Onesimus but it's never wrong to extend grace is it to be gracious Philemon could choose to forgive his slave that would have been a wonderful thing to do but Paul is very careful not to place Philemon under compulsion making him think he had no choice but to forgive his slave Paul removes all pressure on his friend by telling him to place his slaves wrongs and financial burden on Paul himself so he takes that burden off of Philemon now what's our purpose here I'm getting near the end a little earlier than

I thought it would because we see in here a marvelous portrait of Christ this is a picture of Christ Philemon like God the father had been wronged he'd been wronged Onesimus is a sinner that stands for all of us in this room who are sinners and that probably takes out almost all of us right he was like we are in need of forgiveness and reconciliation Paul comes along like Christ exemplifying Christ and was willing to freely pay the price to bring about that reconciliation do you see the gospel as it unfolds in this story in this one chapter little book this is the gospel of Christ

God was wrong Christ paid the penalty for our sins against the father and again I will say to you we are never more like God than when we forgive than when we forgive we are never more like Christ than when we pay someone's debt so that reconciliation can occur Paul was willing to suffer a temporary set of consequences on behalf of Onesimus sins the Lord Jesus Christ was willing to suffer the eternal consequences of our sins he took upon himself all of our sins now the Bible never reveals to us what Philemon did I'll bet you a steak dinner in heaven that Philemon freely forgave Onesimus and did not charge it to Paul and that is exactly how we are to react under similar circumstances and you know I like to do that I've done I've done this thing a few times particularly on a financial thing but I like to do it where nobody knows nobody ever knows let me end with a saying from Charles Spurgeon who had wonderful things the man who does not forgive has never been forgiven wow that's powerful that brings in a well of emotion in me that's powerful brothers the man who does not forgive has never been forgiven Thank you.