

The Character of People Who Forgive

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[0:00] The last time we concluded our introduction into Philemon and I made a promise to you that we would actually get to some verses of Scripture in the second lesson.

! And they had a convention of sorts and during the convention they handed out a survey and it was filled in by thousands of people that were attending this conference.

And in the survey they only had to answer one question. And that was if God would give you anything that you desired, what would it be?

And a list of responses was compiled and it seems that our charismatic friends were desirous of health, wealth, prosperity, and a host of other what I would call material things which are transitory. And by transitory I mean those things are going to one day pass away. Notably absent from the list were things like sanctification, brokenness, righteous living, and holiness.

[1:33] Those types of things, which by the way follows a believer into glory, they didn't make the cut. They weren't on the list.

Well for the next three weeks, and then we're going to break for the summer, we're going to discuss one of the things that should be on every believer's list.

And that is a spirit of forgiveness. There is in fact a spiritual character that belongs to the one who forgives. As a character trait, forgiveness has just about disappeared from the landscape.

Non-Christians, which make up the vast majority of the world's population, view forgiveness as sort of a form of weakness to be exploited.

When's the last time you saw a television show or a movie that was built around a character that forgave, rather than took vengeance on his antagonist?

[2:48] Let's leave movies and television behind. Our culture, even touching our judicial system, is built around unforgiveness and the shifting of blame.

A lot of civil suits are filed when actually that could have been worked out with a spirit of forgiveness. Currently in law schools across the land, there are courses taught that if something bad happens to you, then someone is to blame.

And we can go after them. This is called blame shifting. By the way, that's a word I just made up according to my spell check. So I've invented a word, blame shifting.

One of the more graphic examples in our day involved the attorney John Edwards. Now you may not remember him, no relation to Jonathan Edwards. John Edwards was running as the vice presidential candidate when John Kerry ran against George Bush in his second term.

He kind of fell from the political high ground when it was proven that he produced a child out of wedlock with a woman in California while his wife lay dying of cancer in a bed in North Carolina.

[4:13] So he wasn't held in very high regard, even by former friends. Edwards made his living suing doctors, and he is apparently very good at it. He had amassed a fortune in the tens of millions of dollars.

In one case, he sued a doctor group because the baby they delivered had multiple sclerosis. In depositions that were taken, it was proven that one of the doctors, who happened to be a female anesthesiologist and recently out of medical school, had done absolutely nothing wrong.

She had done it by the book. Edwards was asked by the opposing counsel to dismiss her from the lawsuit because she had in fact done nothing wrong.

His reply really, I think, captured the essence of what is wrong in America, in the judicial system, in the world today, to the statement that the woman doctor had done nothing wrong.

Edwards replied, what does that have to do with anything? That was his comment. That woman left the medical profession. And the last I heard, I think it was South Carolina, she owned an antique store.

[5:33] And she just said, I can't do this. For the true Christian, any unwillingness to forgive is foreign to us.

A spirit of unforgiveness is an open act of disobedience and rebellion directed at God. In fact, our level of forgiveness is to be just as intense as what's God's forgiveness of us.

Ask yourselves, how intense was that? There are a lot of results of the Christian's unwillingness to forgive. I'm going to mention only four.

One, unforgiveness will imprison us in the past and keep the pain alive. Unforgiveness will produce in us a spirit of bitterness.

And that, once produced, will distort all aspects of our Christian walk. Unforgiveness is an open door that gives Satan entrance into our life.

[6:47] And unforgiveness hinders and disrupts fellowship with God. It really doesn't matter what we do as followers of Christ if we refuse to exercise a spirit of forgiveness.

We cannot be right with God. The joy of fellowship can only exist where forgiveness abounds. Now, I'll add a little something here that's not in my notes because there's bound to be questions on some hearts in here.

But what if this guy does something really bad? Goes in and murders my family. How do I go to that guy and say, hey, I forgive you. It's okay. Well, this isn't King James.

This is me. I don't think you can go to him and say, it's okay. Because it's not okay. But I had one guy, and I remember who it was, a minister.

And he said, what you might have to do is go to God and say, I can't deal with this. I'm going to give him to you. I'll just turn him over to you. You deal with him any way you see fit.

[7:53] One of our former pastors from years ago, Ed Sossie, a great man of God. He had a guy in his congregation who thought his sole purpose in life was to destroy young ministers.

And he was well down the road trying to destroy Ed. Ed had a habit of getting up about four in the morning going over to the church. He lived in the Parsons next door and praying.

And one morning he got over there, and he was in intense prayer. And he said, I remember the guy whose name was Ed Smith. And he said, Father, I can't handle Ed Smith anymore.

He's destructive to your church. He's destructive to your called minister. And I'm just going to give him to you. I can't deal with him anymore. And Ed continued his prayer time.

And the phone rang at 6 a.m. And he asked him. Chairman Deegan said, Ed Smith, just died. And Ed Sossie said, Father, I meant moving to another church.

[8:57] I didn't mean killing. Just moving to another church. How important was the spiritual characteristic of forgiveness? God devotes an entire book on the subject.

And he does so in the book of Philemon. And he does it in a real special way. God does not teach us forgiveness here by principles or parables.

He does so by revealing to us a real-life example in the relationship between Philemon and his slave Onesimus.

Or one-simus, as I said last night. Onesimus. And Paul starts with one of his classic introductions. Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus.

And Timothy, our brother. To Philemon, our beloved brother and fellow worker. And to Athea, our sister. And Archippus, our fellow soldier.

[9:57] And to the church in your house. Grace to you and peace. From God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Now there's a bunch of names contained in that introduction.

Some of which I mispronounce. We have, first of all, Paul the great evangelist. Who although a prisoner of Rome. prefers to be known as a prisoner of Christ Jesus.

We have Timothy, Paul's spiritual son in the faith. Philemon is described as Paul's beloved brother and fellow worker. Also mentioned is Athea.

Most probably Philemon's wife. But we're not 100% sure. And he mentions a man. Archippus. Archippus. Who many believe was the son of Philemon.

And Paul's fellow soldier. And finally, Paul mentions that the church. Met. In the home. Of Philemon. So we have this church meeting in the house of Philemon.

[11:04] Paul also gives his standard greeting. Found in 13 of his epistles. Grace to you and peace from God our Father. And the Lord Jesus Christ. Of course, that greeting is not found in the book.

Hebrew. But we want to get into that tonight. The important thing to remember. I'm moving on. Is that grace is the means of salvation. And peace is the result.

Of salvation. That is obtained. By grace. Peace results in that grace. And very important.

And very important. Paul then gives comments. On six concerns. That he has. And if Paul was concerned. We need to be concerned. As well.

And the very first thing I would say here. Is he has a concern. For the Lord Jesus Christ. And that's first and foremost. He had a concern.

[12:00] For the Lord Jesus. Jesus. I thank my God. Always. Making mention of you. In my prayers. Because I hear of the faith.

Which you have. Toward the Lord Jesus. He's talking to Philemon here. In this personal letter. Only one of the prison epistles.

Written to an individual. The only one. And he begins. By praising. Philemon. And this is not. Meant to be just. A flattering letter.

It is intended. To affirm. Philemon's character. As a virtuous man. Which he was. Paul.

Of course. Writing. By the inspiration. The Holy Spirit. brings up. Philemon's. Virtuous character.

Because later. And later. We'll come pretty soon. Because this is a brief chapter.

[12:57] Although it won't come tonight. He's. He's. He's going to make. Paul's going to make. An extraordinary. Request. Of Philemon. And one.

That was. Very. Unusual. In the Roman Empire. Where they live. Paul. Is going to ask. This virtuous man. To forgive.

To forgive. His slave. That's unheard of. Forgive the slave. Now. Paul.

Was an authority. On the character. Of Philemon. Paul. Had led him. We believe. To the Lord.

Jesus Christ. We'll get into that. Probably next time. Paul.

Had apparently. Worked with him. To develop. Further. His relationship. With the Lord. In other words. He disciplined him. Which is what we're supposed to do. Knowing Philemon.

[13:53] The way he did. Paul. Devoted time. To thanking God. For him. And making mention. Frequent mention. Of Philemon.

In his prayers. I mean. How would you feel. You know. You're. You're at home. And. Bedtime. And you know. Paul's in a prison. In Rome. But he's praying for you. The apostle Paul.

There was nothing negative. About Philemon. Philemon. Had done nothing wrong. In his dealing with people. And in that regard.

You're not going to see Paul. seeking to correct some character flaw. In Philemon. There wasn't any. Paul is counting on.

The virtuous character. Of his friend. And that's why he brings it up. And he's going to bring it up again. The point that.

[14:52] That Paul is making. In these opening words of this book. Is that forgiveness. Begins. In the life of the believer.

With a genuine concern. For the Lord. That's where. That's where forgiveness is birthed. That we want to glorify the Lord.

We want to magnify the Lord. And so that's where it begins. In the life of a believer. How can we. Both please.

The Lord. Jesus. And serve him. That's what. That's what Paul was writing. To Philemon about. Paul knew about the faith. Of Philemon.

And we knew. He knew that Philemon. Had great faith. In the Lord Jesus Christ. He knew. That Christ. Had forgiven Philemon.

[15:47] And on that basis. Paul was going to tell his brother. And therefore. You need to have the ability. To forgive others. And like all of us. Philemon could forgive.

Because he had been forgiven. Those were linked. Don't ever disconnect those two. He also had a concern for people.

Paul says. Because I hear of your love. Toward all the saints. He's in Rome. But he heard. Of Philemon's love.

And Paul uses there. Of course. The highest form of love. Agape. That is the love. Of self-sacrifice. It is a willing love.

How willing is it? It is a love. Capable. Of a man. Placing himself. On a cross. Though he had done nothing wrong.

[16 : 44] But to do so. For others. Millions. And millions. Of others. That is the level of love. That we're talking about here.

And Paul says. I know. Philemon. You have. Sacrificial love. And he did have. He did. He even opened up his house. His house was the church. He had.

He sacrificed. And. Because. Philemon's faith. Was real. So too. Was his love. For God. And his fellow Christians. It was a level of love.

That gave Philemon. The ability. To forgive. And that love. Originated with. And flowed. From the indwelling.

Spirit of God. And it taken up. Residence. In Philemon. And then Paul. Paul. Is going to express. To his brother.

[17 : 42] A concern. For fellowship. And I pray. That the fellowship. Of your faith. May become effective. Really interesting.

Use of words here. Mark this down. In your mental file. Somewhere. There really is. No place. For individualism.

Within the body. Of Christ. Real faith. Results. In the desire. For real fellowship. Real faith. Results. In real. Fellowship. We want to be here. With our brothers. And sisters. In Christ. Fellowship. Was a foundational motive.

For Philemon. To forgive. Onesimus. Probably doesn't know that. Just yet. Because he's just getting into the letter. As we are. But he's going to learn. What happened to Onesimus.

[18 : 36] When he went to see Paul. The Greek. Word fellowship. Of course. Is koinonia. It's really sort of difficult. To explain in English.

It is. More. Than merely. Enjoying. The company. Of each other. Although that is important. It's more than. Eating together. All that's real important.

It is a mutual. Sharing. Or a mutual. Partnership. And it is produced. By faith in Christ. So it's entering into a.

Partnership. With one another. Because we are uniquely. Connected. To the Lord Jesus Christ. Paul wants. Philemon's.

Faith. To be. To become effective. And that means. Powerful. An act of Philemon. Forgiving. A slave. Is going to send.

[19 : 36] A powerful. Message. To the church. I mean. Just imagine. If you could. Possibly. Put yourself. In that culture. This rich man.

Philemon. Who was wronged. By this slave. If Paul could get him. To forget that. That's going to be. A strong message. To the church. There can be no. Fellowship.

Absent. Forgiveness. In the church. And over the years. And I've been here. What? 37. I guess Mike. You've been here. A little longer. We've had situations.

Where people had to go. And. Seek forgiveness. Forgiveness. Or offer forgiveness. Or you know. Those things have happened. Those things have happened.

Paul also had a concern for knowledge. Through the knowledge of every good thing which is in you. Now as believers. We receive tremendous blessings.

[20 : 34] Consider some of these. We are blessed. We are blessed. With every spiritual blessing. In heavenly places. In Christ. I don't know if we've ever really plumbed the depths of that.

Every spiritual blessing comes to us. In Christ. We have been given a new nature. We are gifted. With the deep knowledge.

Of the truth. Concerning God. Well where does knowledge about. God come from? It comes through knowing the truth. Let me suggest three ways.

That Philemon could learn the truth. And by the way. These three ways also apply to us. He could read about forgiveness. He could hear a sermon on forgiveness.

Or he could forgive. There's your three choices. Read about it. Listen to it. About it. Or do it. Which of these do you suppose would be the best teacher.

[21 : 39] With the most lasting impact on Philemon's life. Obviously it is Philemon. Than actually forgiving someone. Experience is always the best teacher.

Always. By forgiving Onesimus. Philemon. Would walk in obedience with the Lord. Walking in obedience. Is how all of us experience the good things.

That God has in store for us. And forgive his slave. He's going to be walking in obedience. The way that Philemon can experience the knowledge of God's standard for forgiveness.

Is to forgive his slave. That is a principle here that Paul is giving to Philemon. And he's also giving that principle to all who are in a relationship with the Father through the Son.

This was written nearly 2,000 years ago. Guys, we're in a 2,000 years later sitting in a classroom 10,000 miles where this happened.

[22:51] Talking about it, aren't we? It's a powerful message. It's a powerful message. It's powerful. Paul also expresses a concern for glory. For Christ's sake.

We're to live our Christian life for Christ's sake. All that we do. All that we even think. Should be for the glory of Christ.

Do as I say. Not as I do. But everything we do should be for the glory of Christ. Paul spoke of this in 1 Corinthians 10, 31. When he said, And whether then you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.

If we are truly devoted and committed to the glory of Christ, we can and we will forgive others. An unforgiving spirit cannot glorify Christ.

And I'm sure Paul was confident that Philemon would forgive Onesimus because Paul knew that Philemon's ultimate heart's desire was to bring glory to Christ in all things.

[24:04] Paul knew him well. Had led him to the Lord. Had disciplined him. And when he put it in this context, he knew, was confident, I'm sure, of what the outcome would be.

And Paul said, I have a concern to be a blessing. For I have come to have much joy and comfort in your love. Because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you, brother.

Philemon had developed a reputation for love. How important is that for us in this day of unlove and even, to be honest, perverted love.

Perverved love. Philemon lived an agape style of life. As was common in the New Testament writings, the word heart there means bowels.

We have a different concept of that in our day. But back then, bowels referred to like the seat of feelings. That sort of welled up inside emotions or whatever.

[25:11] Philemon was a man with deep feelings. He was undoubtedly a man who had refreshed many who were hurting. He was in a position to do so. Financially and reputation wise.

He helped people that were struggling and people that were suffering. And trust me, from just secular readings, there was plenty of that to go around in the days of the Roman Empire.

And there's just the same today. There's plenty of that to go around for the church today. Refreshed is a Greek term used to describe an army resting from a weary march.

Philemon was known as a man who brought hurting people rest and renewal. He was a peacemaker in every sense of the word.

There is no evidence in Scripture that Philemon was ever an elder, a deacon, or a teacher.

[26:17] Given his wealth, he was probably a businessman of some type. But obviously he was a kind man. Opened his house to the church. And God can use a kind man.

Because Philemon was already a tremendous source of blessing for others, Paul was confident that he could be counted on to forgive his runaway slave.

Paul goes into this letter with full confidence. He probably was more confident about it than Philemon when he first read the letter. Well, I kept thinking, how do I close?

So I decided I would shamelessly use John MacArthur's closing word for word. Well, Philemon by now has got to be saying to himself, boy, I'm quite something.

Wow. He didn't realize he was as good as he is. And that is exactly what Paul hopes he's saying.

Because in verse 8, which we'll get to next time, Paul's going to hit him between the eyes with what he needs to do.

[27:28] And now he's going to feel so good about what a wonderful man he is, he's going to have to do or he won't live up to his press releases. I remember when OU beat Florida State in 2000 for the National Championship, and Paul said, we read our press releases and we believed them.

We thought we were invincible. Don't ever believe your press releases. Anybody who loves the Lord Jesus Christ, anybody who loves the saints, fellow believers, anybody that loves the fellowship when we come together, anybody who loves true knowledge, anybody who loves the glory of Christ, anybody who loves to be a blessing to others is going to be a forgiver.

They fit hand in love. That's the character of the kind of people who forgive. And so Paul establishes that character as the character of Philemon.

Everything Paul said to this point, he's revealing to Philemon, this is who you are in Christ. And then he was. And then, and we'll see this next Monday, Lord willing, he's going to ask Philemon to forgive his slave.

Now, the question tonight that we leave with, have you and I ever been forgiven by God? And if so, then we need to be ready to forgive others.

[29 : 05] We need to be ready to forgive. Thank you.