

Introduction to Philemon

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Preacher: Tom Holland

[0:00] Amen. Philemon is a book on forgiveness.

! It's sort of our introduction to the book of Philemon, because in Matthew 18 we have an illustration in the form of a parable of forgiveness.

Peter asks a question, if somebody sins against me and I forgive him, how many times do I do that? Seven? Now there's some background there. The rabbis taught that three was the magic number. If you forgave somebody three times, you've satisfied God's will. In the afternoon you could excommunicate them or kill them or whatever you want to do.

And Jesus answered Peter and said, I do not say to you up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven. That was an unthinkable number.

[1:23] He wasn't talking about four hundred and ninety. Is that what seven times? I was not good. I was good in math if there was a real smart girl next to me, but other than that. It wasn't four hundred and ninety times.

In other words, forgive as many times as someone sins against you. It was an endless forgiving.

Same type of forgiveness we have from the Lord. He forgives us for eternity.

And he tells a parable to make that point. And it's really in the parable it depicts God and a sinner.

And the king in the parable is God.

And the man who owes this big debt is the sinner. It says the kingdom of heaven then may be compared to a certain king. And that's God. Who wished to settle accounts with his slaves.

And that's who we are, Nulos. And when he'd begun to settle them, there was brought to him one who owed him ten thousand talents. That's sort of like my credit cards.

[2:27] That's an unpayable debt. You're not ever going to get those paid off. And since he didn't have the means to repay, the Lord commanded that he be sold, along with his wife and children and all that he had, so repayment could be made.

Well, this debt was too much to pay. But if all these people were sold into slavery, at least the king could recover some of his loss.

And most theologians think the gist of this is that the man had defrauded the king. Some of the rabbis taught that the servant was obviously a tax collector who had charged great sums of money and then defrauded the king.

And now he had lost it all, probably went to the casino, and didn't have any means to pay. And he said, well, if I can't get what I owe, I'll get what I can, so sell all of his family into slavery and give me that.

The slave, therefore, falling down, prostrated himself before him, saying, have patience with me and I'll repay you everything. So we see the debtor had a right heart and a willing spirit.

[3:46] Even though he couldn't have done it, those meant that much money, his intention was right. The scripture says the Lord of that slave felt compassion and released him and forgave him the debt.

That's God and the sinner. That's us. When the sinner comes before God and is convicted about his unpayable debt, he's convicted about his sin, God, in essence, says, you have no means to pay me.

You should be sent to hell, and there you would be paying every moment for eternity, and even then it wouldn't be enough. And you should pay whatever you can pay, even though you could never pay me what you owe me.

And really, for the unbeliever, that's what hell is. It's spending forever paying what you can never pay. Your sin debt. And we can never pay that debt, no person to pay that debt, because they have affronted God so greatly as one who had rejected his son.

You can't pay that back. But we see in the scriptures, this king is compassionate, and when he sees the man's willingness, he forgives him the debt. And now here comes a point here.

[5:09] The slave went out. He had just been forgiven. He found his fellow slaves who owed him 100 denarii, one of them. Hold in that.

That's about 100 days wages. It's a lot of money, but it's not a deal breaker. It's not a major debt like he owed. He seized him, began to choke him, saying, pay me what you owe.

And the people who would have been listening to Jesus tell this point would have been outraged at this man's conduct. So his fellow slave fell down and began to retreat him, saying, have patience with me, and I'll repay you.

But the man was unwilling, and he went and threw him into prison until he should pay back what he owed. I never figured that out. You go to prison, you're not going to be paying it very fast.

Well, this is unthinkable. Here is a man who had been forgiven this massive debt, never could pay it back, and he turns around and won't forgive someone who had, in comparison, a rather small debt.

[6:21] And the Scriptures tell us when the fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were deeply grieved, and they came and reported it to the Lord, all that had happened.

And the Lord summoned them and said, you wicked slave, I forgave you all that debt because you asked me, shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow slave, even as I had mercy on you?

Now, there's a principle there. If you want mercy from God, you show mercy to others. And that's how God treats them and we're to be like Him.

So if you want mercy, display mercy. If you want forgiveness from God, be forgiving. And His Lord moved with anger, handed Him over to the torturers until He should repay all that He owed.

Jesus said, so shall my Heavenly Father also do to you, if each of you does not forgive his brother from your heart. If you're not true believers and you have no forgiveness, you're going to be cast, people will be cast into a lake of fire, and they're not ever going to pay that debt back.

[7:27] The parable was very severe. A lot of people concluded this couldn't possibly apply to Christians, but it does. It does apply to us.

Because the man who wouldn't forgive the slave was a forgiven man. God had forgiven him, and that's a believer. But what it tells us is the Lord sometimes has to deal harshly with His own children who will not forgive someone whom the Lord loves.

He disciplines, and every son He scourges. One of the reasons that He disciplines and scourges us is to make, it makes life very trying and difficult, because we have an unforgiving heart towards someone.

Christians are to be forgiving people. That's the principle taught in Scripture. That is the principle that illustrates the character of God in the great message, the parable of the prodigal son.

And that is the principle illustrated in this parable to be true of every believer. And this is a matter, I think, not only of blessing and fellowship with God, but it also is a matter of assurance of our salvation.

[8:52] Whether we're forgiving or not forgiving tells us a lot about our relationship with the Lord. The Puritan Thomas Watson wrote, a decade, for centuries ago, a very interesting statement.

He said this, we need not climb up into heaven to see whether our sins are forgiven. Let us look into our hearts and see if we can forgive others.

If we can, we need not doubt that God has forgiven us. And then Thomas Adams wrote decades ago, he who demands mercy and shows none ruins the bridge over which he himself must pass.

Very eloquent illustration there. And so there is a principle in Scripture, and it is this, you are never more like God than when you forgive.

When you forgive. And such forgiveness should come easy because you have been forgiven. And if you do not forgive, then you put yourself in a position to be chastened by God, and that chastening can be severe.

[10:07] Now the priority of forgiveness is not only given in Scripture in principle, and it is not only given in parable, but it is given in Scripture in personal terms.

God gets very personal. And that is the book of Philemon. Because we are talking about real people here, not a parable, not an example or a story. The book of Philemon is the shortest of Paul's writings, with the exception of 2 and 3 John.

Philemon is the shortest book in the New Testament. But it's tied with the book of Jude. They come in together. But we should never allow the brevity of Philemon confuse us or to pass over this brief

one-chapter book and say, well, it can't be that important.

And, you know, it sort of hangs out in the shadow of Hebrews. Philemon is a tremendously important book. And it's a unique book.

It's a unique book in a number of respects, which we'll be covering. It is the only prison epistle addressed to an individual. The other prison epistles were, of course, Colossians, Philippians, and Ephesians.

[11:30] It is 25 verses long, and yet it climbs up into what MacArthur calls the doctrinal stratosphere. And it's really in the book of Philemon that we see the teachings of the Lord Jesus Christ be put into action.

It's a gigantically important book. Our God is a forgiving God, and there are some that believe that to be a truth relegated to the New Testament only.

The God of the Old Testament people often view as stern, angry, standoffish, far off. But the truth is that forgiveness is a doctrine taught throughout the Word of God.

This is how God described Himself to Moses, Exodus 34, verse 6-7. The Lord, the Lord God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in loving kindness and truth, who keeps loving kindness for thousands, who forgives iniquity, transgression, and sin.

That's all the way back to the second book of the Bible. And the theme runs throughout Holy Scripture. Were it not true that God is forgiving, we should be most pitied.

[13:00] One writer has said that God is never more like Himself than when He forgives. And if that is true, and of course we believe to be so, then man is never more like God than when He forgives.

God's forgiveness is interestingly and uniquely tied to our forgiveness of others.

And I'll tell you, the inability to forgive is an ugly thing. I say this with tears, but I had a sister go to her grave incapable of forgiving her daughter.

And her daughter reciprocated. and they didn't even talk there at the end. It was a very sad commentary. James said this, James 2.13, Judgment will be merciless to one who has shown no mercy.

That is a negative sounding verse, but our Lord Himself and Matthew spoke in its positive counterpart part in Matthew 5.7, part of the Beatitudes, Blessed are the merciful for they shall receive mercy.

[14:16] They shall receive mercy. The Lord Jesus in Matthew 6 taught His disciples to pray thusly, Forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors.

forgiveness. And the Lord gave this stern warning in the same chapter. If you forgive men for their transgressions, your Heavenly Father will also forgive you.

But if you do not forgive men, your Heavenly Father will not forgive your transgressions. Now there is a paradox concerning forgiveness. We all, as believers, share this with each other.

We are already fully forgiven. Positionally, we are fully forgiven. But we still need ongoing forgiveness. We go to the Lord, 1 John 1.9, confessing.

As believers, we can forfeit God's blessing. We can leave ourselves open to divine chastening when or if we fail to forgive others.

[15:24] That Christians are to forgive each other as God has forgiven them is the underlying theme of Philemon. And that book, by the way, was written while Paul was in imprisonment in Rome.

No doubt forgiving many of his captors. But he wrote it perhaps from a prison cell, more likely from house arrest, which is, I think, what most historians think now.

A little historical background. Early in his walk with the Lord, the Apostle Paul had been ministering in various parts of Asia Minor.

By the way, that's modern day Turkey. He had led a prominent citizen by the name of Philemon to the Lord Jesus. Philemon became a member of the church, the Colossian church.

He was wealthy. his house was large enough for the Colossian church to meet there. He was a man active in serving the Lord.

[16:31] Paul even refers to him as a fellow worker. How'd you like Paul to say, oh yeah, there's life, my fellow worker. I mean, that's tremendous. As was the custom for the wealthy in that day in the Roman Empire, we know Philemon owned at least one slave.

Now, he may have owned many, but we know the one, and his name was Onesimus. I don't know if I pronounce it or not. I remember when Ed Saucer was our pastor before he came here, he was at a church in Poto.

And he had a deacon that brought the lesson to the church on this, and he said, how do I pronounce it? Is it one-symas? He said, yeah. So the guy preached the whole message on one-symas.

Onesimus was not a believer, and one day he fled from his master. He fled from Philemon, made his way to Rome.

Now, let's face it, it'd be pretty easy to get lost in Rome. There's millions of slaves, millions of free people. It was the great city of its day.

[17 : 44] And while in Rome, through circumstances that we are not told, Onesimus meets a guy by the name of Paul. Paul the apostle.

He's either luckiest kind of world, or God is sovereign, and there was a divine appointment. There is a possibility, I suppose we can leave this open, that he had seen Paul with his master, with Philemon.

They were, Paul and Philemon were friends. No doubt he had heard Philemon speak lovingly of him. Whatever the circumstances, we know this, his life was never going to be the same again.

The life of Onesimus would not be the same again. While in Rome, he lived up to his name.

Onesimus means useful. Not useful, useful. useful. Useful. And this man became very useful to the Apostle Paul.

[18 : 54] Very useful. There's no doubt that Paul would like to have kept him at his side for the duration of his earthly ministry.

minister. He really would like him to have gone with him as he ministered once he got out of Rome. But there was a problem. There was a matter that had to be settled. You see, Onesimus was a criminal.

Runaway slaves were criminals. He used to be in this country. North and south. North would return them prior to the Civil War.

As a runaway slave, Onesimus had defrauded his owner, Philemon. How'd he done that? Well, he was depriving his master from his services.

[19 : 58] Philemon had paid for him. And he had to work for him. There is a possibility, some claim, that maybe he stole money from him. But even if he did, it wouldn't matter under Roman law.

He was defrauding Philemon. And Paul knew something. And he was certain of this. Paul knew that the relationship between Onesimus and Philemon had to be restored.

There had to be restoration. And there's only one way to pull that off. And I wish I'd been the fly on the wall to listen to these conversations.

Because Paul convinced Onesimus he had to return to his master. He had to go back to Philemon and he had to ask him for forgiveness and restoration.

Well I would imagine there was a pit in his stomach you know when Paul said you got to go back.

We should not be guilty of underestimating the danger of Onesimus returning to his owner.

[21 : 18] He was a runaway slave. And the Roman Empire was actually filled with slave catchers. I guess they were the bounty hunters of their day.

They made a living apprehending and returning runaway slaves to their owners. And the safest way for Onesimus to travel would be to travel with a free man.

A guy that was not a slave. And that's where a companion of Paul by the name of Tychius comes in. And he had the honor of delivering Paul's letters to the Colossians and to the Ephesians and Paul sent Onesimus with him on the journey.

So there was a little bit more safety there. I remember when Robert E. Lee was 12 years old his mother wanted to go to South Carolina to visit family. Put him on a train.

She sent with him her most trusted slave. She thought Robert was too young to take care of himself. The man got deathly ill.

[22 : 31] Robert got him off the train, put him in a hotel, summoned a doctor. The doctor came and said he can't live out the week. This is what he needs if he has any chance at surviving.

And Robert E. Lee nursed him back to health. And they completed their journey. strange behavior for the man branded the champion of slavery which he was not. That's another lecture that I've given by the way.

In any event, Tychius and Onesimus are headed to Philemon. Now letting Onesimus leave was a great sacrifice for Paul.

And for the slave, the runaway slave, it was potentially grave. I mean, this could be a death sentence. There were practically no limits on how a master could treat a slave in the Roman world. Slaves were often killed for far less offenses than was Onesimus. It wasn't like that in the United States. As bad as slavery was, there were some certain rights.

[23 : 49] My family helped found a church in eastern Tennessee that's the longest active church, Baptist church. I think it's the Red River Baptist Church.

And I've got their minutes from even like the late 1700s. There was one in there where they put a man disfellowship, kicked him out of the church for beating a female slave.

And then months later he brought her to the service and he asked her forgiveness in front of the congregation and he was reinstated. You don't read that in the history books anymore. But in the Roman world they could treat him any way they wanted to.

Slaves were often killed for far less offenses than that which Onesimus had committed. there was actually an incident on record, you can read about it in the rise and fall of the Roman Empire, where a single slave accidentally broke a saucer and the woman of the house had all of her slaves executed for that offense.

Slave life was not often pleasant in the Roman world. Rome was in constant fear of a slave uprising and this precipitated their harsh treatment.

[25 : 17] They wanted them under the thumb or under the yoke of the Roman government. And in fact, there was a large slave uprising a century before, led by a guy that you've heard of because you watch movies, Spartacus.

the fact that Onesimus was willing to return to Philemon to meet an uncertain fate speaks well of the genuineness of his faith.

He was a true believer. He realized what Paul was telling him he needed to do. Now, in addition to sending Onesimus and Tychus, Paul also sent along a personal letter to his friend Philemon. he wanted to explain what was going on here. And we should be extremely happy that Paul did so because it came part of the canon of Scripture.

It's inspired the Word of God. In the letter, Paul urges Philemon to forgive Onesimus and receive him back not as a slave but as a dear brother in Christ.

[26 : 31] Now, let me say, we can say that in the middle part of America in the 21st century, but that in the context of the Roman Empire in those days was nothing short of revolutionary.

That was unheard of. You had a slave run off and now he's your brother? Have you lost your senses? It was revolutionary.

Which brings me to the briefly to the topic of Christianity and slavery. Slavery forms the backdrop to the book of Philemon.

And we really cannot fully appreciate just how revolutionary the letter is unless we understand the slavery system in the Roman Empire.

And I've already alluded to it a little bit. It was taken for granted. It was considered to be a normal part of everyday life in the ancient world.

[27 : 37] Slavery was the engine that drove the Roman economic system. The number of slaves was enormous. Some estimate that the slaves made up one-third of the Roman Empire.

And the Roman Empire was everywhere in the known world. Slaves were not thought of as persons but rather as chattel property of their owners.

And you know, you could I'm sure find pockets in the South during slavery where slaves were not treated as human, fully human. When I went to college in the South in 1966, had a guy that roomed in our dorm.

He was a nice guy, played football, good guy. But he invited me to church one day and went to a Baptist church. That's the first time I ever been to a Baptist church. I thought you guys were a bunch of snake handlers.

I had all these preconceived notions, you know, but I went to this Baptist church. Well, we went to lunch and I told him, I said, I noticed there were not any black people in that church.

[28 : 48] He said, well, they're not allowed. And I said, well, why not? And he said, because they're not fully human. He said that. He believed that.

This is 1966. He played football with black guys. In fact, he sat on the bench because there were black guys on the team. I couldn't believe it. I stayed away from Baptist churches for a long time, you know.

Finally came to this one. Slaves were not thought of as persons that they were property. Property of their owners.

They could be sold. They could be exchanged. They could be given away as a gift. Often, you know, a child would grow up and when he was leaving home, they would give him one of the trusted slaves.

They could be seized to pay off a debt owed by the master. You got behind on your credit card, come in and take some slaves and sell them. slaves originally in the Roman Empire had no right to marry.

[29:54] They could cohabit with a member of the opposite sex, but only with permission of their master. Now, by the time though of the New Testament era, the empire was changing.

The treatment of slaves was starting to improve. Finally, the masters realizing that contented slaves were better workers. I used to tell Jim Moe that all the time.

Finally, masters started realizing some things. Slaves actually gained some rights. By 20 AD, a slave accused of a crime could request a trial by jury, as could any citizen.

Slaves got to the point where they could own property, and they could leave property to their families, to fellow members of slavery. history records that in the Roman Empire there were slaves that were doctors, musicians, teachers, artists, librarians, accountants.

There was opportunity for slaves to receive an education. That happened in the United States, in Virginia. A man and his daughter underground started a school for the children of slaves.

[31:10] It was illegal to do that. And the man paid for it, his daughter ran the school. That was Robert E. Lee, by the way. By the first century, many slaves had begun to acquire their freedom.

Owners often held out the prospect of freedom to inspire their slaves to be more productive. A system was even set up where they could purchase their own freedom.

Slaves and masters sometimes had very deep feelings for one another. There were a lot of recorded instances where slaves turned down their freedom, opting instead to remain with a beloved master.

That happened at the end of the Civil War. Not all the time. Not even the majority of the time, but sometimes. My ancestors in Kentucky were slave owners.

When they released their slaves, two remained with them for life. And were taken cover and buried in a family plot. So, they had some deep feelings.

[32:16] Wills have been discovered whereby masters freed their slaves or left some property and money. And one historical record indicated as many as half a million slaves were freed in the Roman Empire over a 40-year period.

Now, that created some problems for Rome and some restrictions were put in place by the time of Augustus Caesar. And there's something really important for us to understand as followers of Christ and as students of the book.

The New Testament nowhere attacks slavery directly. Doesn't do it. Have you ever thought of that? Jesus never spoke out against it. The apostles didn't. Had the Lord or his followers done so, there would have been massive chaos.

There would have been a slave uprising. It would have been crushed immediately and brutally by the powerful Roman army. Thousands and perhaps millions of slaves would have been massacred.

[33:24] And importantly, the gospel would have been transformed solely into a vehicle of social reform. There are a lot of people who hold that today. It's called the liberal church. An unbelieving church, by and large.

But, and this is a large but, I submit that Christianity sowed the seeds which led to the destruction of slavery.

The seeds were sown by Christianity. And that, in my view, is the theme of the book of Philemon. Christianity destroyed slavery. Particularly in the Christian world. You may find it even today in pockets in the Islamic world and other places. But in the Christian world, if you really believe the book and you really are a follower of Christ, it wiped it out.

Not every theologian believes that, but they can be wrong. significantly, Paul does not order Philemon to free Onesimus.

[34:37] He never issued that order. Paul does not even condemn slavery as evil. Instead, he implores Philemon, just all you have to do is this, Philemon, treat Onesimus as a dear brother in Christ.

Wow! You realize the significance of that? Here's your slave Philemon. Give him a hug. He's your brother in Christ.

That was the beginning of the end for slavery. Slavery only survives if there are abuses.

Paul had just eliminated the abuses. And by doing so, he ultimately eliminated slavery itself. I don't know how the Christian slave owners in the 1800s read Philemon.

Or if they read it. How could you read that? But there were pockets. One of the greatest preachers ever produced in America was a guy named John Jeffers.

[35:48] He was an uneducated slave. Never had a day of schooling. He preached to thousands. He preached to white people, black people. He was freed by his owner so he would preach.

He said, I'm going to free you if you'll spend your life preaching. He had a huge church in Richmond, Virginia. And his greatest sermon, you can find on the internet, the sun did move. D, D-E, sun did move. people came for hundreds of miles to hear him. In his New Testament commentary, Donald Guthrie had this to say about the importance of Philemon in relation to slavery.

The epistle brings into vivid focus the whole problem of slavery in the Christian church. There is no thought of denunciation, even in principle.

The apostle deals with the situation as it then existed. He takes it for granted that Philemon has a claim of ownership on Onesimus and leaves the position unchallenged.

[37:01] Yet in one significant phrase, Paul transforms the character of the master-slave relationship. Onesimus is returning no longer as a slave, but as a brother beloved.

It is clearly incongruous, I've been worried about that word all day, for a Christian master to own a brother in Christ in the contemporary sense of the word, and although existing order of society could not be immediately changed by Christianity without political revolution, which alone is contrary to Christian principles, the Christian master-slave relationship was so transformed from within that it was bound to lead ultimately to the abolition of the system.

All that in a little bitty book of the Bible. It did that. It's an amazing book, which brings us to the close tonight with a promise next week, we're going to get to verse one.