

## Lesson 3

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

! Interestingly, and I need to confirm this, but I don't think the word forgiveness appears in the book. That happens some. I mean, Trinity's not in the Bible. The Jehovah Witnesses are great at pointing that out.

And then I say, well, you're here at my door wanting to talk about the theocratic kingdom. That's not in the Bible either. And that usually shuts them down. Or when I shut the door, that shuts them down. Neither does Paul build on any doctrinal or legal principles as the foundation for forgiveness. Paul is making an appeal that we'll be studying this week and next based on love. Based on Christian love.

Paul, he knew Philemon well. He led him to the Lord. He knew him to be a godly man. He had a heart that was right before God.

[ 1 : 18 ] He knew that the Spirit of God had taken up residence in Philemon and was working in him, revealing truth to him. Now, we're not certain where Philemon was in his walk with the Lord.

But we can assume from the text, I think, that he was a mature believer. He opened up his home as a host of the local church.

He was obviously a man concerned about the salvation of souls. About the maturing of the saints through the study of the word. How deep an understanding Philemon had of the doctrine of forgiveness is not made clear to us in this brief letter.

It would appear that he certainly knew more about the theological principles of forgiveness than perhaps I do or maybe some of you. Dr. MacArthur lists a number of elements that make up the doctrine of forgiveness.

First, he points out that during his earthly ministry, the Lord Jesus expanded the meaning of the New Testament commandments. For instance, there is a command in Exodus that prohibits murder.

[ 2 : 35 ] The Lord said that that prohibition included anger, hate, malice, vengeance, and the lack of forgiveness. Wow!

He put that on a level with homicide. These he placed under the banner of prohibiting murder.

So the Lord took forgiveness to a much higher level than the Jew had lived under in the Old Testament law. They were confident, well, I have killed my neighbor, I must be okay.

Another principle at work here has to do with our proper understanding of sin. All sin is ultimately against God.

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

[ 3 : 36 ] And the great example of this was David, King David. He entered into an adulterous affair with Bathsheba. He sinned against her.

He sinned against her husband. He sinned against his own family. And as king, he sinned against the nation, didn't he? He sinned against the whole nation of Israel.

But David cried out when he came to that moment of repentance. And he recorded that for us in Psalm 51. And it's a beautiful psalm.

And in verse 4 of that psalm, he says he's crying out to God against thee, thee only, have I sinned and done what is evil in thy sight.

So ultimately, all sin is against God. Whatever our offenses are against men, and they can be many, the greater offense is always against he who is absolutely holy, the Lord of heaven.

[ 4 : 37 ] 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, can we not forgive those who commit lesser offenses against us? And I hope certainly in here, the answer to that would be yes. Now there's another principle at work here. If we fail to forgive others, we will not enjoy forgiveness from God. And the Lord was very clear on this point.

Over in Matthew chapter 6, in verse 14 and 15, If you forgive men for their transgressions, your heavenly Father will also forgive you.

Well, that's good news. But, this is Jesus speaking, Sermon on the Mount. But, if you do not forgive men, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions.

[ 5 : 41 ] Oh, that took a nasty turn. Can we say Jesus went from preaching to meddling? He's speaking truth here. He's God, the omnipotent God.

That's powerful. And here it is. I just corrected it. We risk the chastening of the Lord if we fail to forgive others. A lack of forgiveness brings with it a very high price to pay.

Believers who do not forgive will not enjoy fellowship with the Lord. If an unforgiving spirit disrupts our fellowship with the Lord, then our fellowship with each other will also be negatively impacted. Now, such forgiveness hinders the proper operation of the church. If we are an unforgiving church, it's going to hinder.

And, you know, we've had periods at Highland Park. We go back a long way, but we had periods where we were fussing and fighting and we couldn't forgive people. And it was over good reasons like the color of carpet and things like that.

[ 6 : 50 ] You know, your typical Baptist arguments. I've told you all in there before, Dr. Saucier, our former pastor, he was going to write a book someday. Pastor, you're probably not aware of this, but about why Baptist churches split.

And he thought he was going to write a book about all the reasons. But he had one down in Poto, wasn't his, that split over the size of a piece of ham.

They had a fellowship after the church and had a line the women were serving and a little boy, the pastor's son, got a piece of ham and behind them was a chairman deacon's and he got a piece of ham and it was smaller.

And he told the lady, he said, hey, his ham's bigger than mine. And she thought he was joking and she said something. And he got in her face, pushed her and got in her face.

And her husband saw it and the fight was on. Deacons had to jump on both of them, get them separated. And the church split over that. And like Ed said, they split over the size of a piece of ham.

[ 7 : 52 ] I mean, come on, at least stick with carpet. If rather than forgiving those who transgress against us, we seek revenge, we stand guilty of usurping the very authority of God.

God is much more capable in dealing with offenses against us. He knows down to the subconscious what's going on. After all, he has a complete understanding of the situation.

That is far superior to our own feeble understanding. And by failing to forgive, we risk taking the sword of divine judgment out of God's hands.

And that's where it always belongs. And trying to wield it ourselves. Well, that would not be healthy. I'd probably cut myself.

But that only compounds the sin. God has been very clear that vengeance belongs to Him and He will repay.

[ 9 : 00 ] And that being true, it is best to leave vengeance to Him. And don't ever do what I say. And I shouldn't say it. I do it more jokingly. But, you know, I'm okay with vengeance belongs to the Lord as long as He hurries and let me watch.

But we can't take that attitude either. I saw that in a movie one time. There's a lot of things I need to get rid of. Dan can tell you that. There's another principle at work.

An unforgiving spirit makes us unfit for worship. Boy, that will hit you right between the eyes. We're not fit to go in and worship.

If we've got people in that congregation that we haven't forgiven, we think they've wronged us or whatever, that's going to affect worship.

The Lord spoke of this in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5. 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.

[10:13] First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and present your offering. That's pretty powerful. And the interesting thing about forgiveness and reconciliation is that either party can initiate it.

It doesn't have to be one or the other. Either one of them can initiate it. And regardless of the circumstance, we should always seek reconciliation.

Always. Jesus told us to love our enemies. That was foreign to the Jewish mindset. He was supposed to kill your enemies and love your neighbor and love your friends.

But He said, love your enemies. Do good to those that hate you. They hated Him first. There's a final principle here.

Forgive even if it has not been sought. Jesus asked the Father to forgive those murdering Him. Can you imagine?

[11:15] Stephen, the first martyr of the church, did the same thing. He asked the Lord to forgive them that were stoning Him to death. Well, that's great stuff.

And that brings us to our lesson tonight. That was the introduction. And now we'll get into the lesson. Let's go to Philemon chapter... Verse 10.

Ed Sausser, he said, I'm going to be in Jude tonight. Chapter 2. And everybody started turning. There's no chapter 2. Verse 10. I appeal to you for my child Onesimus, whom I have begotten in my imprisonment, 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.

[12:37] According to God's plan of forgiveness, we are to be receptive to bringing back one who has offended us. The grounds for Philemon forgiving his slave who had offended him are threefold.

First, Onesimus was repentant. Second, Onesimus had been transformed by the power of Christ. And third, Onesimus had proven himself faithful. This was real. It was legitimate. He wasn't just trying to get in good with Paul. The proof of his repentance is grounded in the fact that Onesimus was standing in front of his owner and Philemon's there reading this letter from Paul.

Onesimus delivered the letter along with others, but he was in the entourage. He had returned, though Philemon had the absolute power under Roman law to punish him severely, up to and including taking his own life.

He could take the life of Onesimus. It was a capital offense to run away. When Onesimus returned to Philemon, he stood there as a spiritual offering of Paul.

[14:08] That's what's going on here. So we've got evidence that he had repented. I mean, if he hadn't repented, he's going to tell Paul, I'm not going back down there.

He'll kill me. I'll be executed. But no, the repentance was genuine. He went regardless of what might happen to him. Onesimus was transformed.

The slave ran away. And he was not a slave that was returning. When Onesimus fled, he became useless.

His name means useful. That's what the name means. But when he ran away, he was useless. He was certainly useless to Philemon. He was cheating Philemon.

He owned him. And he was useless in other manners too because he was a criminal. He was a criminal. Subject to arrest and imprisonment or worse. Now, it is Paul's argument.

[15:08] He is useful to both of us. He's useful to Philemon and he's useful to Paul. He who is light had transferred Onesimus from darkness to light.

Now he is in light. And Onesimus was faithful. He had captured Paul's heart. And Paul now has a desire.

He wants him to return and he does. And he wants, he's praying that he will capture the heart of Philemon. Paul wanted and he wished there had been a way to keep Onesimus with him.

He wanted him to stay. He was useful to Paul. Being in prison, he had proven to be very helpful to the apostle. But Paul knew that something had to happen in the great sequence of forgiveness.

And what was that something? Onesimus had to be restored. He is a criminal. Subject to arrest. Subject to imprisonment. Subject to execution if Philemon felt like doing it.

[16:21] Onesimus is useless until he is restored to his owner. And I said in the first lesson, the Lord in the Word of God never condemns slavery.

But if you read the book of Philemon, slavery dies. We'll probably sum it up next week with that lesson. This is the death kill of slavery for Christians.

We'll get to that next time. In verse 15 and 16, for perhaps he was for this reason separated you, separated from you for a while that you would have him back forever.

no longer 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.

Paul asked two things of his friend Philemon. First he says, Philemon, will you welcome your slave back? Just open your arms, open your home, welcome him back.

[ 17 : 31 ] And next he asked Philemon to restore him to service. Pretty powerful. Now this is not a debate over the issue of the guilt of Onesimus.

He was guilty. He is guilty. He ran away. He's owned by another foreign to us perhaps but not in that culture. Now all three parties, Paul, Philemon and Onesimus knew that he was guilty.

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

You know, don't ever try to outguess God what he was up to in all this. There are times, beloved, when we cannot see the dark providence of God at work.

We just can't see it. Someday we see it in the light. Maybe we never see it in the light until glory. Maybe we won't be revealed to us then. But God is always at work through providence.

[ 18 : 47 ] Things may get mighty dark before God sheds light on the matter. And it is possible that that darkness may endure for a lifetime and not be lifted until glory.

But something evil had occurred here. Something evil had occurred. Onesimus, as the runaway slave, had broken Roman law. And he was a criminal.

But we have to 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.

All things work together for good. Doesn't say all things work good. They work together. God's weaving this tapestry. Is it tapestry or tapestry?

Tapestry. You ever look on the other side of that tapestry? It's just threads there. But you look on the other side, it's a beautiful picture. God sees the picture. We see the threads.

[ 19 : 48 ] God uses circumstances that we find ourselves in and he can bring good results. And God always triumphs over sin.

He's going to win. Always. He does so by his providence and he does so by his grace. It reminds me of the great hymn by William Cowper's.

And let me say real quickly, it's really pronounced Cooper's, but it just looks like Cowper's to me. I guess in heaven if he says you got to get it's Cooper's, 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.

I just love that. I was thinking that the other day and I said, where did I read that? Well, here.

William Cowper's. And God not only takes the circumstances of life and works them for good, he does so to accomplish his own purposes.

[ 20 : 56 ] That's why God's at work here. He's accomplishing his purpose. In the present example, Onesimus left temporarily and came back to Philemon forever.

He's back. And you know what? They're still together. together as we meet this very evening. Have you ever thought of that? Philemon and Onesimus are together forever.

And I don't know if they have lectures in heaven, but maybe we can go and sit down and listen to Philemon and Onesimus talk about this whole thing. I don't know that. He left a slave and by God's grace and nothing other than God's grace, he returned a brother in Christ.

That is an amazing accomplishment of the Spirit of God. It's just amazing. And you notice in this little 25 verse book, it is very interesting to note, Paul never asked his friend Philemon to free his slave.

He never asked him that. He does something even greater than emancipation. He says, receive your slave back as a dear brother in Christ.

[ 22 : 20 ] That's at a higher level. Philemon, he's now your brother. It reminds me of Steve Saint. His dad, Nate Saint, was killed down in South America with the five missionaries.

We went to a concert in Tulsa. Was that Stephen Chapman or and they always have somebody they bring out and they have like an intermission. There must have been 10,000 people there.

He brings out this guy, he says, we call this guy Grandpa. He's from South America and he's a great man and for six months out of the year he lives with us.

And he introduced him. He was in his Navy regalia and he talked about him and he was born in this tribe and he did all this.

And he said, now I don't know how many people are here but there's thousands of you and I want to give you a visual picture of the grace of God. This is the man that speared my father to death.

[ 23 : 29 ] And he lives with us six months out of the year and he sleeps in the bedroom, there's twin beds with our son. And we all call him grandfather.

Boy, I mean, there wasn't a dry eye and there wasn't a peep. People just transfixed with that. He killed my father. And then my mother went back with others and led him to the Lord.

What a powerful picture that was that night. Wow. I could tear up if I wasn't so strong. Mike, are you doing okay? Already, yes. Yeah. He had already become, to Paul, a brother in Christ.

Philemon would enjoy Onesimus at a level that was never thought of before that. Philemon couldn't have a clue what was coming back at him.

Onesimus shows up in Philemon's house and now they are both covered by the redemptive blood in Christ.

[ 24 : 39 ] Now that's pretty powerful to have in common with somebody, isn't it? In my travels, I have run into Christians in every part of the world. And I couldn't really understand that until I was with my good friend John Short.

I wish you all knew him. John's in his 70s. John could have been the chairman of the board of just about any corporation in the world. He's from Australia, brilliant guy, but he chose the life of a missionary.

He chose the life of a missionary. And he has been in China. He's led so many people to the Lord. There's so many stories that I could tell you about him and about people that wanted to kill him that then were under the redemptive blood of Christ.

He led them to the Lord. It was just absolutely amazing. And now Philemon, oh by the way, John Short told me this, and I've shamelessly stolen it.

The reason you find believers in every part of the world, the gospel is so powerful it will find a way to penetrate the darkest areas on earth. Todd Nettleton, VOM, he flew into one of the stands, I think it was one of them, there's a bunch of stands over there, Turkmenistan and all those stands.

[ 26 : 01 ] He flew in and he had to get in a little old Jeep and drive. The driver took him 16 hours on a dirt road so he could get a story, 16 hours back and he flew back out.

And it was just phenomenal. He met believers along the way. the gospel had penetrated. I was on an elevator in China and this guy had a dove on a Chinese man.

I couldn't speak to him. I couldn't speak Chinese. He couldn't speak. But he saw me looking at it and we kind of went like that and I went yeah. It was an amazing moment. It was an amazing moment. Philemon is actually receiving a double portion.

He had back a very useful slave. His very name means useful. And he now has back a dear brother in Christ to share the good news and to minister to others.

Remember Philemon's got a church in his home and it may have been a pretty good sized one. No telling what role Onesimus might play in that. But there's still something else that has to be done.

[ 27 : 10 ] There is the matter of restitution. Philemon lost money. Onesimus. He didn't work. We don't know how long he was with Paul but he wasn't working.

Philemon's losing money. Verse 17 Paul says if then you regard me a partner accept him as you would me.

But if he has wronged you in any way or owes you anything charge that to my account. just send me a bill Paul.

Yeah right. I'll get on that. There is no question that Philemon had been wronged by the flight of Onesimus.

At the very least he was out of both money and service. It was a costly adventure to say the least. it may be possible that Philemon had to purchase another slave to replace Onesimus.

[ 28 : 19 ] Some writers well I don't really buy into this completely but some writers suggest that maybe Onesimus had stolen some money from Philemon to finance his escape based on the fact that Paul says by the way if he owes you some money you know maybe Onesimus told Paul I raided the cookie jar we don't know that but he says if he owes you some money charge it to me.

The Bible teaches that restitution must be made in such a case. Numbers chapter 5 verse 6 to 8 speak to the sons of Israel when a man or a 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 who 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 Lord for the priest besides the ram of atonement by which atonement is made for him.

Of course these guys were all under the Old Testament and that's the Old Testament New Testament hadn't! been written! And we can probably look at that and say that's a pretty obscure Old Testament passage I mean it's not something I read every night in bed you know but that was what was operative in that time frame the New Testament had not been written well one thing certain Onesimus could never repay his master for the crime he had committed most likely he had not found employment in Rome he would be kind of hiding in the dark that gave him time to serve Paul and Paul uses a very powerful argument to Philemon to consider he asks his friend to accept Onesimus just as if he were accepting Paul himself Paul was a partner in the faith with Philemon and he wants Onesimus to be their partner as well well

Philemon is at a crossroads it would be right to demand restitution from Onesimus he could do it under the Old Testament he could do that under Roman law but it also is never wrong to be gracious it is never wrong to be gracious Philemon may choose to forgive his slave that would have been a wonderful thing to do and I said last week it would be a powerful example to the church not only the church in Philemon home but down through the ages to this day the 21st century but Paul is very careful here not to place Philemon under compulsion making him think he has 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 now we see in all this a marvelous portrait and it's not a portrait of

Paul or Onesimus or Philemon it's a portrait of Christ this is ultimately who the story is about the glory of Christ Philemon like God the father had been wronged Onesimus is a sinner like Tom Holland and that stands for all of us who are sinners if there's any other sinners in here it's you and me he was like we in need of forgiveness and reconciliation Paul like Christ was willing to freely pay the price to bring about that reconciliation so do you see the gospel unfolding in this story this is the gospel of Christ now again I say we are no more like God than when we forgive never are we more like Christ than we than when we pay someone's debt so that reconciliation can occur

[ 32 : 51 ] Paul was willing to suffer a temporary set of consequences on behalf of Onesimus sin the Lord Jesus Christ was willing to suffer the eternal consequences of our sin he who knew no sin became sin that we might become the righteousness of God 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 I'll bet you he didn't send a bill to Paul I just got a feeling and that is exactly how we are to react under similar circumstances I close this with a very powerful statement from Charles Spurgeon the man who does not forgive has never been forgiven but still but but