

Lesson 1

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[0 : 00] I'm a little intimidated tonight.

I haven't taught on Wednesday night in a long time.! Hopefully I'll remember how. We'll have some fun and we're going to go for about four weeks and then whether Willard's up.

We'll pass it to Willard and eventually pass it back to Mr. Lee and it'll be a three-way round robin. Teachers teach so teachers can learn.

That's what I'm doing here. Been doing it for nearly forty years and in teaching myself I hope that you'll pick up some things as well.

But we begin this evening on the little book of Philemon. I remember when I taught this the first time and I called it this forty years ago and I called it Philemon.

[1 : 10] Fortunately Jan Hefter was in the room and she quickly corrected me. But we're going to be in the little book of Philemon and I refer to it as a little book due to its brevity.

It is twenty-five verses long or short depending on how you look at it. The two shortest books in the Bible are second John and that's thirteen verses.

Third John at fourteen verses. Philemon is next at twenty-five verses. However, it's in a tie with Jude.

Also twenty-five verses. Jude's that great book that lives in the shadow of revelation. The shadow of revelation. But it's a great great book and we're going to go there eventually someday.

There is somewhat of an absurdity as we try and calculate the number of verses. To discover the longest or the shortest books and of the various inspired writings of the old and new testament.

[2 : 13] And I say that because the chapter and verse distinctives were added centuries after the original writings. Paul didn't sit down and say chapter one verse one.

Those were non-existent. These were letters. And Paul wrote thirteen letters. Philemon is a letter that he composed to an individual by the name of Philemon.

There's some other things about the book of Philemon that we're going to be talking about. And I draw your attention to your handout there. If you don't have one, there's still some up there.

But we come to our number one here. Philemon is the first of what is referred to.

Tonight we're looking at a book that's referred to as the prison epistles. So Philemon is one of Paul's prison epistles. As the title suggests, Paul wrote this while in confinement by the Roman authorities.

[3 : 21] It is also unique in the sense that it is the only letter that Paul wrote that is addressed actually to an individual.

This man by the name of Philemon. And we're going to be hearing a lot more about him in the days ahead. And your number two on the little fill in the blanks there is the other prison epistles are Ephesians, Philippians, and Colossians.

So those encompass the four prison epistles written by Paul when he was in the custody of the Roman Empire. Now, if you are into deep doctrinal truths, then Philemon is probably not going to be your book.

It does not climb the doctrinal heights of Paul's other writings such as Romans and Galatians and so forth.

This is in no way meant to suggest that the book of Philemon is unimportant. It is vitally important as a work of the Holy Spirit.

[4 : 37] And it has been important to the church for nearly 2,000 years. So just because it's a little short book, no reason to at all consider this just to be a secondary writing of Paul's.

The Holy Spirit wrote these words. In this book, the Apostle Paul takes a foundational truth taught by the Lord Jesus Christ during his earthly sojourn and applies it to real-time circumstances with

which Paul was quite familiar.

Now, number three on your list there, the foundational truth taught in Philemon is that Christians are to forgive one another.

We're to forgive one another. That's what Christians do. And in many respects, number four, forgiveness is the major theme taught in God's Word.

That's a major theme taught. It is not only the major theme, but it is obviously very important. Any accurate description of God is that He is a forgiving Father.

[6:01] Now, all the way back to the early days of the Old Testament, we read this description of God in His own words as He spoke to Moses in Exodus chapter 34, verses 6 to 7.

The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin. Of course, that was written centuries before Christ in the pages of the Old Testament. The fact that forgiveness is an important and recurring theme in the Bible is beyond all dispute.

But perhaps the greatest expression, or one of the great expressions of forgiveness, was given to us by the Lord Jesus in the story of the prodigal son, found in Luke chapter 15, verses 11 to 32.

There was a father who had two sons. One arrogantly took his inheritance and left his father's home.

[7:22] That was a way of saying, I wish you'd already died so I could have inherited my portion. Give it to me now. And he went to a far country. He lived a decadent and debauched lifestyle.

The money ran out. He took a job that was demeaning to its core, especially for a Hebrew. He worked with pigs and was reduced to eating the pods the pigs left behind.

Not exactly the most nutritious filling meal. One day, this young man came to his senses and realized that back home, his father's servants had much more to eat than did he.

And here he was in a pigsty, dying of hunger. He decided to return home, but was convinced that any level of forgiveness of his great transgression was beyond all possibility.

It just was not going to happen. He was content to offer himself as the lowest of servants of his father, and that would be where he would live out the rest of his life.

[8:42] And you remember the story. Even on the way the journey home practiced what he was going to say to dad when he got there. Well, as he's returning home, his father spotted him while he was still far off.

It's a very poignant passage. The father spotted him because every day the father would climb a brow of a hill and look intently, hoping against hope that his son would return.

And one day his prayer was answered. Spotting him, the father ran to him. Now let me say something parenthetically. That's something Jewish noblemen never did.

They did not run. Why wouldn't they run? They were wearing robes. Robes would fly up and expose their legs. That was verboten.

You didn't do that in the Jewish culture if you were a nobleman. That just didn't happen. The dad ran to him, fell on his neck, he kissed him, and many other things happened.

[9:57] The son was forgiven and welcomed back into the family by the father. Now we call this the story of the prodigal son.

But it is really the story of the forgiving father. That's the message of the prodigal son. And there's all kinds of places to go with that.

The older brother, we do all kinds of things. But this is about a forgiving father. And the father in this story that Jesus himself told is God.

He's giving an example of God the father. And it is representative how the father forgives. Think of that.

Looking intently for a sinner wanting him to come back. He does so eagerly. He does so without reservation.

[10:53] And he does so lavishly. Someone has said that God is never more like himself. Than when he forgives. And I would suggest that being the truth.

That we are never more like God. Than when we forgive. So that's a great life lesson there.

Proverbs 19.11 says, A man's discretion makes him slow to anger.

And it is his glory. To overlook a transgression. And we remember the stern warning given to us by James.

James 2.3 Judgment will be merciless to one who has shown no mercy. That is a very negative statement of course.

And the Lord said the same thing in the Beatitudes. But in a powerfully positive way. In Matthew 5.7 Blessed be the merciful. For they shall receive mercy.

[12:00] And that of course is part of the Sermon on the Mount. In the next chapter. Matthew 6. The sermon continues all the way through chapter 7. In Matthew 6.12 it says, Forgive us our debts.

As we also have forgiven our debtors. Matthew 6.14 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. Powerful statements about forgiveness.

From God himself. Second person of the Trinity. Now number five in your list here. Unquestionably. Forgiveness. I'm sorry. The greatest forgiveness.

Found in the Bible. Is found at the foot of the cross. There is where forgiveness. Intersects with sinful men and women.

[13:03] And it's the power of the cross. Is what Christ did when he took our sins. We imputed to him our sinfulness. He imputed to us his righteousness.

There at the moment of salvation. The forgiveness of God is complete for his children. It is referred to by theologians. As a comprehensive forgiveness.

The practice of forgiveness. Accompanyes us in our walk. In sanctification. That's the process taught in scripture. And we're going to be doing that on Monday night.

For I don't know. 10, 12, 15 months. But that is the process. Of sanctification. When we are unforgiving.

The process of sanctification comes to a halt. But there's a great paradox here. And here's the paradox. Here is God's expression of total forgiveness.

[14:05] Ephesians 1, 7. In him. We have redemption. Through his blood. The forgiveness of our trespasses.

According to the riches of his grace. We have that in Christ. But then. What about day to day? What about hour to hour?

Well. 1 John 1, 9. If we confess our sins. He is faithful and just. To forgive us our sins. And to cleanse us. From all unrighteousness.

So we've been cleansed. But we need daily cleansing. We've been washed. From head to toe. You know. Peter said. Wash my whole body. He said. I don't have to wash your whole body.

Just your feet. Picked up some dirt. That's us walking through the world. We pick up the dirt of sin. Confess it. Go to the Lord. And confess it. Spurgeon said.

[15:01] He never went over 10 minutes. Without talking to the Lord. Often confessing his sins. What happens when true believers. Refuse. To forgive.

We forfeit. Blessings. And we invite chastening. And in fact. Number six there. We are to forgive others.

As God. Has. Forgiven. Us. That's the standard. That's the standard. And that is the theme of Philemon. And I'll tell you. There's nothing worse.

Than to see an unforgiving person. I hate to use this as an example. But I had a very close relative. I did her sermon. I did her funeral. Went to her grave.

One son had died in an accident. Two sons were still alive. A daughter was alive. The oldest boy. And the youngest girl. Would not. Even go to the funeral.

[15:57] Or talk to her. One of them showed up at the funeral. But they wouldn't. They wouldn't talk. They were all. None of them would forgive. They didn't have a base. On which. They understood forgiveness.

So exactly. What is the history. Of the book of Philemon. Jerry asked before we started. You can get to verse one. No. Not tonight. But we'll get there. What exactly.

Is the history. Of the book of Philemon. What moved Paul. To write this. This wonderful letter. Number seven. In your list.

Paul. Led Philemon. To saving faith. Some years earlier. He'd met Philemon. And he led him.

To the Lord. We don't know exactly when. We don't know exactly where. Probably during Paul's ministry. In Ephesus. And I've been in that region.

[16:51] In what is today Turkey. Then Asia Minor. And then number eight. Philemon. Returned home. To Colossae. Where he became. A prominent member.

Of the church. That met. In his home. That too. Is going to be very. Interesting. For us. The church. Met. In his home. Philemon.

Was a wealthy man. He had a home. Large enough. To accommodate. The Colossian church. For their meetings. We know.

That he was. An obedient Christian. Paul. Refers to him. As a fellow. Servant. How would you like Paul. To say. Oh. There's Mike.

He's my fellow servant. And. What's your name? Tom. Tom. Okay. Yeah. But. Fellow servant. He called Philemon. His fellow servant. That's. Coming from the apostle Paul.

[17:48] That is just. Fantastic. I've been wanting water so bad. And I forgot I had some. Number nine. On your list.

Philemon. Was. A slave owner. And one of those slaves. Was a man. By the name of Onesimus. I always remember.

Our former pastor. Ed Saucier. He was in another church. And a guy was reading scripture. That morning. And he said. Ed. This word here. This guy here. Is that one Simus? And he said. Yeah. One Simus.

And the poor guy. Got up and read it to the church. They were all snickering. It's Onesimus. Ed. Can you see Ed doing that. Sharon. Oh yeah. Absolutely.

He would. So. Paul is a slave owner. He owns at least one slave. He may own a thousand. We don't know. We're not told. But he. He owned a man by the name of Onesimus.

[18:46] Onesimus. Was not a follower of Christ. This is. This is number 10. And he ran away from his master. He fled to Rome. He fled to Rome. Where he met Paul.

And was led to faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. He goes to Rome. And he meets Paul. Now.

It was not uncommon. For slaves. Who ran away. And there were millions of slaves. One third of the Roman Empire was slaves. And they would hide out.

In the metropolis and capital of the Roman Empire. Rome had millions of people. And that's where they would go. To blend in among the crowd. And.

Hope I didn't get off track here. I may have. Well anyway. While in Rome. Onesimus met the apostle Paul. And.

[19:45] Through circumstances. That are unknown to us. We don't know how they met. Many have speculated over the centuries. How such an encounter could occur.

I think it's best that we leave that to the sovereign will of God. He wanted them to meet each other. And it happened. I do think it's safe to assume.

That Onesimus had heard Philemon speak. Of the apostle Paul. Paul had been with him. Probably in his home. Whatever the human circumstances. We know.

That the slave's life was changed for eternity. Because through Paul. He met the Lord Jesus Christ. And when you truly meet Christ. And I do. It's life changing isn't it?

It is life changing. Now. Number 11. We do know. That he began to assist Paul.

[20:41] Paul. In his prison ministry. Thus living up to his name. Onesimus means useful. That's what it means.

Useful. Paul no doubt. Wanted to keep Onesimus. At his side. In the service of the Lord. God. But. There was a major problem. Number 12. Onesimus. Is a criminal. And that's a problem.

Because not only are we under God's law. We're under man's law. Unless it conflicts with God's law. We're obligated to obey. The laws written by man.

And here he is. He is. He is. This man. Useful. And useful to Paul. He's a criminal. He had committed. Number 13.

[21:40] A. Fraud. Against Philemon. He had defrauded Philemon. Depriving him. Of his services. Very important.

For us to realize that. There is a possibility. And we'll. We'll kind of plow this a little later. And we can't be dogmatic. Onesimus might have even stolen some money.

To finance his escape. Up to. To Rome. We don't know that. For certain. But we'll. We'll plow that field. When we come. To it. Now.

Number 14. Paul knew. Onesimus. Had to return. To Philemon. He had to go back. Why? To seek. Forgiveness.

And restoration. Although. He had. No. Expectation. Of receiving. Either. There was no.
[22 : 39] Guarantee. But. There was a problem. There was a logical problem. Well. Well.

I'm going fast. Sorry. Sorry. You couldn't.

Just tell. Tell. Onesimus. Well. Colossae. That way. Actually. It would have been. That way. Start walking. Go back.

To Philemon. and just head out on that dirt road there and you'll be fine. That wasn't going to work. There were men in the Roman Empire who made very good livings catching runaway slaves. That was their job. We had the same thing during our Civil War. And they returned them to their masters where they would be punished and sometimes under Roman law that punishment could involve death.

[23 : 49] Slaves didn't have a whole lot of rights. They could be executed. But in God's perfect providence Paul had another colleague, a man by the name of Tychius who was going to be delivering two letters to the churches at Colossae and Ephesians.

Paul had written these and so Paul, understanding the danger that Onesimus was in, chose to send him back with Tychius and that would afford him relative safety.

He would be safer with a free man who was delivering these two letters. Onesimus was returning to an uncertain future as I said.

Under Roman law his destiny rested exclusively with Philemon. He couldn't go down and file complaint with somebody.

It was all up to Philemon. And slaves were often crucified for running away. Under the Roman system, the system of law, Onesimus had no expectation of forgiveness from his master.

[25 : 11] None whatsoever. Now Rome dealt harshly with slaves fearing a slave uprising. And a hundred years earlier than this, there had been a slave uprising.

And thousands, tens of thousands of people, including tens of thousands of innocent slaves had nothing to do with it, were killed. Then number 16, the fact that Onesimus was willing to return under these circumstances speaks to the genuineness of his newfound faith.

He's a believer. He's going to go back regardless of what might happen to him. Because he knows under the tutoring of Paul it's the right thing to do.

It's the scriptural thing to do. It's the godly thing to do. So we have Paul sending Onesimus back to Philemon with a traveling companion named Tychius.

But Paul did one other thing for which the church has been eternally blessed. He sent along a letter to Philemon.

[26 : 29] Turned out to be 25 verses centuries later. In that letter Paul urges his friend Philemon to forgive Onesimus and most significantly to receive him back as a brother in Christ.

I don't know why I don't have that on the list. That's major. Write that down at the bottom there. Paul urges Philemon and we'll develop that next time in the next few weeks.

Receive him back as your brother in Christ. In reality Paul is asking Philemon to live out two New Testament commands.

Ephesians chapter 4 verse 32 Be kind to one another tender hearted forgiving one another as God in Christ forgave you.

And Colossians chapter 3 verses 11 to 13 Here there is not Greek and Jew circumcised or uncircumcised barbarian slave free but Christ is all and in all put on then as God's chosen ones holy and beloved compassionate hearts kindness humility meekness and patience bearing with one another and if one has a complaint against you forgiving each other now what standard do we apply to that forgiveness as the Lord has forgiven you so you must also forgive well what was the depth of Christ's forgiveness for us the cross he went to a cross to appropriate for us forgiveness he satisfied the wrath of God and those in Christ are forgiven on that basis there's a final point here and it's point number 17 on your list nowhere in the

[28 : 48] New Testament does the word of God attack the institution of slavery directly that usually comes as a surprise to most people Christ never spoke out against it the apostles never did Paul certainly doesn't think about what might have happened though if Jesus and the apostles had done so there would have been chaos there would have been violent revolution in the known world slaves and innocent Roman citizens would have been massacred perhaps even by the millions and even more frightening the gospel of Christ would have been just another platform for social reform and I want to suggest to you the liberal church embraced the social gospel a century ago with

devastating results they lost the true

Christ in the social gospel doesn't mean we don't do good things and I would put this church up against anybody in the ministries that we have going but here's a major point number eighteen christianity sowed the seeds for the destruction of slavery that's the point of philemon and let me add something again parenthetically and I'm a student of the civil war there were a lot of brothers in christ during the civil war period of america that were slave owners my family were slave owners my great grandfather they owned two slaves a woman by the name of mammy and a man by the name of lewis grisard now I will say this and I'm not justifying it but when slavery ended they stayed with our family and in fact they're buried one of them at least in the family plot and I won't bore you tonight but there's great stories about that but mammy raised my great grandmother she raised her and when that former slave died my great grandmother my dad said she grieved that was like losing her mother so we

I descend from slave owners but christianity in paul's writing to philemon sowed the seeds for the destruction of slavery it would not happen by armed revolution how would it happen changed hearts that's how slavery was going to end ultimately and as we shall see in subsequent lessons paul does not order philemon to free onesimus that's nowhere in there he doesn't even teach that slavery is evil instead paul and let's remember writing by the inspiration of the spirit of god asked philemon to treat onesimus as a dear brother in christ and we're going to look at that because paul he's slick the way he pulls this off we'll eventually get to that it's really amazing but the impact of this is monumental it's absolutely monumental this virtually eliminated the abuses of slavery why do I say that a christian cannot beat a slave that is a christian brother or sister a christian can't crucify a slave that is a christian brother or sister a true christian and one christian cannot own another christian and there's no doubt that philemon is a brother in christ and there's no doubt that onesimus is a brother in christ and we're going to watch this develop in the days ahead thus in these twenty five verses we find the seeds for the ultimate destruction of the institution of slavery now people say well wait a minute now does slavery still exist in some parts of the world yeah it does the moslem world other places i'm talking about the christian world i'm talking about the christian world so we're going to have some fun with this it's a great book paul does some really amazing things here and i apologize i promise i'll go much longer next time and we're going to by the way i have some copies of this entire lesson anybody that wants them i'll put them over there on the stand and we'll be dismissed brother willard would you pray for us as we're dismissed? Thank you.