

The Appeal for Forgiveness

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[0:00] The New Verses We identified five recipients or groups of recipients, so let's just review those real quick.

The first one, of course, is Philemon himself, and we said that he's a wealthy man from Colossae. The second one was Athia, and that's a lady who likely is Philemon's wife because they live in the same house.

And then Archippus is a minister at Colossae who's believed to be Philemon and Athia's son because he lives there too. And then the fourth recipient is the church that meets in their house. And then finally we said that we were the fifth recipients because we have the letter, therefore we know that the letter was intended for us. And when we talked about the reason for the letter, we said its purpose was to show grace and peace, and that grace and peace would be manifested through forgiveness.

So today we'll look at verses 8 through 16, and to set the context for the new material, we're going to start reading in verse 4. And in verse 4 through 7, as we talked about last week, Paul is summarizing his prayers for Philemon.

[1:36] So let's pick up with verse 4 and go all the way through 16. I thank my God always, making mention of you in my prayers, because I hear of your love and of the faith which you have toward the Lord Jesus and toward all the saints.

And I pray that the fellowship of your faith may become effective through the knowledge of every good thing which is in you for Christ's sake. 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.

Therefore, though I have enough confidence in Christ to order you to do what is proper, yet for love's sake I rather appeal to you, since I am such a person as Paul the Aged, and now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus.

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 ineffective by compulsion, but out of your own free will. For perhaps he was for this reason separated from you for a while, that you would have him back forever, no longer as a slave, but more than a slave, a beloved brother, especially to me, but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord.

[3:02] So before we look at the verses themselves, let's provide more detail about the new main character who's introduced in verse 10. We mentioned Onesimus briefly last week, and we said that he was a slave who was owned by Philemon, and Onesimus had left home.

The section of Philemon we'll review next week actually implies that Onesimus also stole from Philemon, although we don't know that for sure. Now we know that Onesimus has returned, and with him, Onesimus has a letter from the Apostle Paul on his behalf, and in that letter that's where Paul wants Philemon to forgive Onesimus.

So when we looked at the first seven verses last week, we noted the foundations for forgiveness, and in verses 8 through 16, we'll see the factors of forgiveness.

So on your handout there, the factors of forgiveness is the first blank. And as we look through the verses tonight, pay particular attention to what the Apostle Paul does in these verses, because we're going to draw all the application from what we see the Apostle Paul do tonight.

And verses 8 and 9 show the first factor of forgiveness, and that is Paul's authority. So Paul's authority is the first thing that we see. And listen to verses 8 and 9 again.

[4:24] They say, Therefore, though I have enough confidence in Christ to order you to do what is proper, yet for love's sake I rather appeal to you, since I am such a person as Paul the aged, and now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus.

So when we looked at verse 1 last week, remember how we talked about that this is one of the few letters where Paul does not refer to himself as an Apostle during the greeting. In fact, Paul noted there that he was in prison, and he called himself a prisoner of Christ.

And we also see Paul call himself a prisoner of Christ in these verses, too. And this time, though, Paul very clearly alludes to his authority. Notice he says he has enough confidence to order Philemon to do what is proper.

But before we move on to the next factor of forgiveness, let's notice how these verses contrast with how unconverted people would expect someone to act. So where did we say that Paul was writing this letter?

And then how did we describe Philemon? Yeah, we said that he was a wealthy man from Colossae. So had Philemon not been converted, how likely do you think it is that he would have paid attention to a letter from a prisoner?

[5:38] It's not very likely that he would have paid too much attention to what somebody writing from prison would have told him. So it's just kind of an interesting contrast how when someone is converted, they look at things a little differently than what they might have otherwise.

And we'll see some other contrasts as we go through the rest of the verses tonight. So let's move on to the second factor of forgiveness now, and that's Paul's appeal. So Paul's appeal is the second piece.

And we see that in verses 10 through 14. So listen to the appeal in these verses. In fact, verse 10 starts out with, So when we first started talking about Onesimus, a few minutes ago, did you notice I said that he left home?

Most commentators actually assume that he was a runaway who didn't intend to return, and he may very well have been a runaway, but there's also another possibility too, because at that time Roman law allowed a slave involved in a dispute with his owner to appeal to somebody else to be a mediator for the slave.

So he may have just been going to Rome intentionally to try to find Paul and use Paul as the mediator, because since the church met in Philemon's house, there's no doubt that Onesimus would have already known Paul.

[7:23] So regardless of whether Onesimus intended to return home or not, we know that Onesimus really needed somebody to intercede on his behalf. And we'll notice as we go through the verses that Paul very skillfully guided Philemon toward choosing the right behavior.

And we don't really see that when we look at verse 10 in English, but let's talk a little bit about verse 10, because we know that at best, Philemon and Paul have a strained relationship, right?

And then at worst, Onesimus may really have been a runaway who was facing severe punishment and maybe even death, if he had indeed run away. And Paul, of course, knew that Philemon might not be overjoyed when Onesimus returned home.

And when Paul wrote what we now know as verse 10, he structured it differently than what we see in the English, because Paul put Onesimus' name at the back of the verse. We actually see it at the front of the verse.

So think about how that would have read, because first, Paul would have been telling Philemon about this new convert to the faith who'd become very useful to him, and how he'd become very special to him, and how he was like his own heart.

[8:35] So how do you think Philemon would have acted when he heard that? Probably would have been pretty happy to hear that, right? To hear that somebody else had just been converted. And then, once he read that, by putting Onesimus' name last in the original, Paul essentially says, Oh, that guy you're so happy about, that's Onesimus.

So he's kind of let him into getting into Onesimus' side, or getting onto Onesimus' side there. So that's one way he guided Philemon in the right direction, to make sure he did what Paul wanted him to do.

And this is another example of how Christianity differs from the world, because when we looked at verse 1 last week, we talked about how Paul often called Timothy his son, even though here he calls Timothy his brother in this letter.

And this time, notice that Onesimus is the one being called Paul's son. So Onesimus' new relationship to Paul is an example of what we discussed last week, because remember last week we said that when we enter into a right relationship with God, every other human relationship is changed as well.

So in Christ, Onesimus is Paul's son in the faith, but he also has a new relationship with Philemon as well. And we'll talk with both of those relationships when we get to verses 15 and 16 in a few minutes.

[10:01] So let's look briefly at verse 11 before we move on. And verse 11 includes a play on words. Because Onesimus was a very common slave name, the name itself actually means useful when it's translated.

And so Paul was saying that the person named useful was once useless, but now he's useful again. And when we look at verses 12 and 13, we see just how useful Onesimus has been to Paul. Because in Roman prisons, prisoners didn't get clothing or food provided to them from the authorities. They had to have somebody provide that to them. So normally their family or friends would have to provide that, or else they would die in prison.

And Onesimus had obviously been filling that role for Paul, because in verse 13, that's where we see Paul say that Onesimus had been ministering to him in his imprisonment for the gospel, and that's why he wanted to keep Onesimus with him.

So this is another interesting twist when you think about it too, because Onesimus thought he just needed help with his earthly master, but Paul first had reconciled Onesimus with God before he tried to reconcile him with his earthly master.

[11:16] And then we have the irony here of Onesimus actually finding his freedom through a prisoner. So we have the slave running away, trying to give reconciliation, and he ran to a prison and wound up getting his freedom then.

And as Paul describes himself often, we know that Paul often calls himself a bond slave of Christ. So let's take just a minute about what we've already covered tonight.

So we've seen that Onesimus is now a Christian, right? And we've seen that Onesimus has been ministering to Paul, and we can tell how much Onesimus means to Paul. And in verse 12, we see that Paul refers to Onesimus as his very heart.

And yet we've also seen Paul refuse to order Philemon to forgive Onesimus and send him back to Paul. And verse 14 then tells us the reason why that is. So listen to verse 14 again.

It says, 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. So Paul appeals to Philemon to grant his request out of love.

[12:27] So in your blank there, it's Paul appeals to Philemon to grant his request out of love. When we covered verses 4 through 7 during the last session, we saw Paul's two prayer requests concerning Philemon.

And remember, one of those was for Philemon to recognize just how much becoming a Christian had changed Philemon. Think back to verse 6. That's where Paul said, I pray that the fellowship of your faith may become effective through the knowledge of every good thing which is in you for Christ's sake.

And if Paul simply ordered Philemon to forgive Onesimus, then Philemon might not notice the change that had happened in himself. So even though Paul's making the appeal primarily on Onesimus' behalf, Paul uses it as an opportunity to help Philemon grow as well.

And we know that the church members were listening in as the letter was read, so the church members certainly would benefit from hearing that too. So think about what these verses say about Paul.

We know that Paul very clearly has needs that Onesimus is capable of addressing, but Paul is willing to put himself at risk by letting Philemon and Onesimus have a chance at reconciling and then also strengthening both of their faiths at the same time.

[13:44] So notice how Paul is putting others first as we go through here. So we talked about the first factor of forgiveness being Paul's authority, and we've seen that Paul's appeal is the second factor.

So now let's look at the third factor of forgiveness, and it's one we've alluded to already, and that third factor is Onesimus' change status. So Onesimus' change status is the third one. And we see that change status in verses 15 and 16. So listen to those verses again. So if the first two factors of forgiveness were not enough to convince Philemon to forgive Onesimus, the third one should be.

And Philemon and Onesimus no longer have an owner-slave relationship. They're now brothers in Christ. So brothers in Christ is what goes into your blank there.

And Paul's appeal for Christians to forgive each other is not unique to him. Let's listen to a couple of cross-references from Jesus himself. The first one is from Matthew 5, verses 21 through 24.

[15:14] Matthew 5, verses 21 through 24 say, You've heard that ancients were told, You shall not commit murder, and whoever commits murder shall be liable before the court.

But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother shall be guilty before the court, and whoever says to his brother, You good for nothing, shall be guilty before the supreme court, and whoever says, You fool, shall be guilty enough to go into the fiery hell.

Therefore, if you are presenting your offering at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your offering there before the altar, and go, first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and present your offering.

So Jesus is warning that lack of forgiveness is enough to send someone to hell, yet we as believers are fortunate enough to be spared that judgment. The mere fact, though, that God has forgiven us should prompt forgiveness in us as well.

And as believers, we may be spared from hell if we don't forgive, but we're not spared from God's discipline. And Jesus tells us that in Matthew 18, verses 21 through 35.

[16:18] I'm not going to cover that passage in detail, because I think all of you probably remember that's what Don covered a couple of Sunday nights ago. So if you want to hear the detail on that passage, listen to his great treatment of those verses.

But what I wanted to do, though, just to bring a couple of things to mind for you, is to summarize what John MacArthur says about those verses. And here's what John MacArthur says about Matthew 18, 21 through 35.

He says, An unforgiving attitude will destroy a believer's relationship with his fellow believers. They will then, through church discipline, ask God to bring chastening into his life. Unforgiveness not only hinders our relationship with God, but also with other Christians.

So listen to that last line again. It said, Unforgiveness not only hinders our relationship with God, but also with other Christians. So although we may be spared from eternal judgment, that gives us a good reason to still want to forgive our brothers as well.

So let's talk about something else we see in verses 15 and 16. And for that matter, it's in the whole letter to Philemon. Notice how verse 15 starts. Talking about Onesimus, that's where Paul starts verse 15 with, Perhaps for this reason, he was separated from you.

[17:36] So Paul seems to be trying to make sense of why the episode between Onesimus and Philemon happened there. And in Onesimus' case, we know that he sinned against Philemon. Yet God used Paul not only to bring about reconciliation with Philemon, we've also seen how God used Paul as an instrument to reconcile Onesimus with God himself.

So Philemon may have lost a slave, but he gained a brother. One of the things, though, I wanted us to think about, though, is because all things seem to have worked out well despite Onesimus' sin, does that excuse what Onesimus did?

And I put a long quote in your handout from Mark Dever because he explained it pretty well. He said, God often overrules our actions for good.

The goodness of that result doesn't justify our sin. God is good and kind, and he may use the sin to help remind us that there is more going on than we can see, to remind us how God has dealt with our own stubborn rebellion against him, how he has been patient, how he has waited and kindly persevered with us.

This is the same God who used Joseph's brother's sin against Joseph for good. This is the same God who was active even in the disciples betraying Jesus, and the soldiers nailing him to the cross.

[18:53] What they did was sin, and they were responsible for it, but that wasn't the whole story.

God is always active in a way we don't fully understand. So that last little bit is something we can always take comfort in, right?

We always know that what we see is not always the full story, and that God is active in ways that we don't fully understand. Sometimes we'll understand those ways. When we're here on earth, other times we may not understand them until we actually get to eternity, if we even understand them then.

So let's talk about some application points for tonight's passage. And these application points come from behavior that we see from Paul. And in these points, we see Paul show us how a true Christian should act.

Because Paul demonstrated willingness to show humility. So show humility is the first thing on your list. And that comes from verse 8.

And verse 8 is where we see Paul set aside his authority because of love. So the second thing we see Paul express a willingness to do is he expresses regard for others.

[20:03] So express regard for others is what goes into your next blanks. We see that in verses 10 and verse 14 as well.

Because Paul showed a regard for Onesimus by appealing on his behalf. And once Onesimus was saved, Paul showed the same regard for Onesimus as Paul did for Timothy. And we see that Paul noted that the man who was once useless was now useful again.

But we also see that Paul showed a regard for Philemon as well. Because instead of ordering Philemon to do the right thing, Paul sought Philemon's consent so that Philemon's faith would be strengthened through this whole episode too.

And the last thing I wanted to bring out tonight of what we see from Paul is that he was willing to accept his own suffering for the good of the Gospel. And we really see that throughout the whole letter.

So again, he was willing to accept his own suffering for the good of the Gospel. Because think about where Paul was when he wrote this letter. He was in prison, but he wasn't wallowing in self-pity in prison.

[21:17] He was still working to spread the Gospel. And so look at those points again. We see that Paul was willing to show humility. We see that he was willing to express regard for others.

And we see that he was willing to accept his own suffering for the good of the Gospel. And if we become willing to do those things, we should be able to forgive a brother in Christ when we need to. I wanted to wrap up tonight with a preview of next week. Because next week, we'll finish Philemon by looking at the freedom of forgiveness. And in those verses, we'll discuss how Paul also is willing to take responsibility for the wrongdoing of others.

And Mike quoted Philemon 18 on Sunday night, and I wanted to read that verse again. That's where Paul says, but if he has wronged you in any way, or owes you anything, charge that to my account. And as we wrap up Philemon next week, we'll see that in addition to being real people, Onesimus also represents us. Paul's behavior models what Christ did for us people, and Philemon's behavior illustrates how God now views true Christians.

[22:21] So when we tie this all together next week as we finish Philemon, you'll see those things come together. So here's one last thing to ponder as we finish up.

When we forgive fellow Christians, we demonstrate our love for one another and for Christ. And as Peter says in 1 Peter 4.8, Above all, keep fervent in your love for one another, because love covers a multitude of sins.

So listen to that verse one more time. It's 1 Peter 4.8, and it says, Above all, keep fervent in your love for one another, because love covers a multitude of sins. So next week, we will look at verses 17 through 25, where we'll see the freedom of forgiveness.

Thank you.