

The Freedom of Forgiveness

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Date: 05 May 2010

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[0:00] We continue our study of Philemon tonight. Let's go ahead and review what we looked at last week.

! Remember last week we saw where Onesimus, the absent slave, returned home. And with him, Onesimus had the letter written by Paul. And it's this letter that we've been going through. And of course, Paul wants Philemon to forgive Onesimus. Last week we looked at verses 8-16, and we saw Paul decline to use his authority to order Onesimus to do what Paul wanted. Instead, Paul appealed to Philemon on the basis of love. So let's remind ourselves of that appeal by reading verses 10-14 to set the context. Starting in verse 10, it says, 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've 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.

[1:17] So let's talk about the application points we saw from last week, because in those we saw Paul show us how a true Christian should act. There he demonstrated a willingness to show humility, to express regard for others, and to accept his own suffering for the good of the gospel.

And tonight we'll finish Philemon by looking at verses 17-25, and we'll see the freedom of forgiveness as we go through the verses tonight. We'll also discuss how we're like Onesimus, and how Paul's behavior models what Christ did for us, and then we'll also look at how Philemon's behavior models God's treatment of us.

The reason why we reviewed the application points again from last week was because verses 17-19 actually fit with those application points, and then verses 17-18 also set up the rest of the letter, and in the rest of the letter we'll see Paul give several reasons why Philemon should forgive Onesimus.

So let's read verses 17-25 now, and remember that verse 17 continues Paul's appeal on behalf of Onesimus. It says, At the same time, also prepare me a lodging, for I hope that through your prayers I will be given to you.

Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, greets you, as do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, Luke, my fellow workers. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.

[3:12] So let's go ahead and start looking at the verses in detail now. And we just reviewed how Paul demonstrates how a true Christian should act, and he continues that pattern in verses 17-18.

So let's take a look at those two again. It 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. So during the first 16 verses, we've talked about how Paul has been guiding Philemon toward the desired behavior. And now Paul gets a bit more direct, because verses 17 and 18 actually have the letter's first imperative statements.

So look at the two imperatives that we see in verse 17 and also verse 18. The first one is that Paul wanted Philemon to accept Onesimus, just as Philemon would accept Paul.

And later tonight we'll see Paul summarize how Philemon would treat Paul. And then the second imperative there is that Paul wanted Philemon to charge Paul with anything Onesimus owed.

[4:12] So Paul showed that he was willing to make restitution himself so that Philemon and Onesimus could reconcile with each other. We'll come back to verses 17 and 18 a little bit later, but for now let's go ahead and move on to the remaining verses, because these are the verses where we'll see Paul provide several reasons why Philemon should forgive Onesimus.

And the first reason why Philemon should forgive Onesimus is Philemon's own unpayable debt. So Philemon's own unpayable debt is what goes into your first blank.

And we see that in verse 19. So let's read verse 19 again. Remember in the first section of that verse, Paul is still talking about his willingness to make restitution on Onesimus' behalf.

So that verse says, I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand. I will repay it, not to mention to you that you owe to me even your own self as well. So what's the unpayable debt that Philemon owes Paul?

Well, we see here that Paul says Philemon owes Paul his own self. And this reference is why scholars believe that Philemon was probably converted under Paul's teaching. So Paul's not exactly being very subtle here, is he, when he says that.

[5:32] You notice how he says, I'm not going to mention to you that you owe this. He actually does a pretty good job of mentioning. So let's look at Paul's next reason why Philemon should forgive Onesimus, and that's the opportunity to bless others.

So the opportunity to bless others is what's next. And we see that in verse 20. Verse 20 is where it says, Yes, brother, let me benefit from you in the Lord.

Refresh my heart in Christ. So the request to refresh Paul's heart in Christ is another imperative, isn't it? And when we looked at the verse 7 two weeks ago, we learned that Philemon had already blessed others.

So listen to verse 7 again. That's the verse that says, 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. So now Paul's saying that he wants some of that blessing for himself.

And the Greek word translated as benefit there is from the same verb from which the name Onesimus derives. So Paul's probably making another play on words there like he did in verse 11. And by forgiving Onesimus, Philemon would benefit Paul in the Lord by bringing him joy because of the obedience and love that he showed.

[6:50] So do you think Paul was being selfish for wanting some of the blessing for himself? Well, in some ways he might have been, but he also knew that Onesimus and the rest of the church listening to the letter would be blessed even more when they saw that example.

So let's move on to the next reason now why Paul says Philemon should forgive Onesimus. And that is the necessity to obey Christ. So the necessity to obey Christ is your next reason.

And let's read verse 21 again. That's where we'll see that. Verse 21 says, Having confidence in your obedience, I write to you, since I know that you will do even more than what I say.

So last week we reacquainted ourselves with Jesus' teaching about forgiveness in Matthew 18. So now let's look at what Jesus says about forgiveness in Luke 17, verses 3 and 4.

In Luke 17, verses 3 and 4, that's where Jesus says, Be on your guard. If your brother sins, rebuke him. And if he repents, forgive him. And if he sins against you seven times a day and returns to you seven times, saying, I repent, forgive him.

[8:02] So Philemon would have been familiar with that, and he also would have been familiar with the teachings of Paul. And listen to what Paul says in his other letter to the Colossians.

These verses are Colossians 3, verses 12 and 13. Colossians 3, verses 12 and 13 say, So as those who have been chosen of God, holy and beloved, put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience, bearing with one another and forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone, just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you.

So listen to that last line again. That's where it says, Just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you. So Paul really knows how to paint somebody into a corner, doesn't he, with these verses.

He's not done yet, though, because he still gives Philemon more reasons to forgive Onesimus.

There are at least three more in there. And the next reason is Philemon's accountability.

So we'll see Philemon's accountability in verse 22. Verse 22 is a verse that says, At the same time, also prepare me a lodging, for I hope that through your prayers I will be given to you.

[9:21] So if I can paraphrase a little bit there, Paul's really saying, I'm going to get out of prison, and when I do, I'm going to come check up on you. So put yourself in Philemon's place.

If you knew that the Apostle Paul intended to pay you a visit, what do you think you'd likely do what Paul asked you to do? And notice that Paul wasn't planning just to stop by for a quick chat.

He was intending to stay for a while, based on his request to prepare a room. So if Philemon didn't forgive Onesimus, Paul was going to find out about it. He might be able to keep that secret for a

little while, but if he was staying at your house, he wouldn't be able to keep it secret for too long. So let's take a short detour from the reasons why Paul wants Philemon to forgive Onesimus, and point out just a couple other things about this verse. In verse 17, we saw Paul urge Philemon to accept Onesimus like Philemon would accept Paul.

And verse 22 shows us how Philemon would treat Paul. What does Philemon plan to do for Paul? Well, we see he's going to prepare a room for Paul, and we also see that he would pray for Paul.

[10:29] So by extension then, Paul is urging Philemon to do the same things for Onesimus. He also puts a little bit of pressure on Philemon too, because notice that Paul says that through Philemon's prayers, he intends to be released to them.

So he's pointing out really that he really needs Philemon to pray for him as well. So if Philemon actually welcomed Onesimus back into his house and began praying for him, what's the likelihood that he would have forgiven Onesimus?

Probably pretty likely, because you're not going to have somebody as a guest in your house if you haven't forgiven him. And it's awful hard to pray for somebody if you're still angry with that person. So let's go ahead and go back to the reasons why Philemon should forgive Onesimus, and we see the next reason in verses 23 and 24. So listen to those verses again.

They say, So these verses actually just list names, right?

[11:35] So you're probably asking, how are these verses about another reason why Philemon should forgive Onesimus? Well, that reason is that he should maintain fellowship with them.

And the reason why it relates to maintaining fellowship is because by sending the greetings from the five men known to him, Paul actually reminds Philemon of his accountability to all of them.

And failing to forgive Onesimus would disappoint their high expectations of him and also bring him under their discipline. So remember what happened in Matthew 18, verses 34 and 35, when the slave who was forgiven his large debt refused to forgive a smaller debt owed to him.

And here are verses 34 and 35 of Matthew 18. It says, And his Lord, made with anger, handed him over to the torturers until he should repay all that was owed him. My heavenly Father will also do the same to you if each of you does not forgive his brother from your heart.

So by forgiving Onesimus, Philemon would set a good example for his fellow believers. And if he refused to forgive Onesimus, Philemon would severely damage his relationship with fellow believers.

[12:48] And putting aside the men mentioned in the verses for a second, think about the impact it would have had on the church that meets in Philemon's house if Philemon had refused to forgive Onesimus. So then in verse 25, we see one last reason why Philemon should forgive Onesimus.

And that's the presence of Christ's grace. So Christ's grace is what goes into your blanks there. And verse 25 is the verse that says, The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.

So that benediction is more than just an ending. It's actually a reminder that God's grace will be what enables Philemon to forgive Onesimus. The verse is actually a prayer that Philemon and everyone listening to the letter will find the strength to forgive.

And remember when we talked about the recipients of this letter in our first section, we actually said that we were one of the recipients of the letter because we actually have the letter today. So that's there for us as much as for anybody else.

John MacArthur actually puts it this way. He says, Paul realizes that what he asks is not possible in the flesh because the flesh seeks vengeance, nor is it possible through the law because the law demands justice.

[14:02] Although Philemon could not forgive Onesimus in his own strength through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ working with his spirit, he could. So that brings us to the end of the reasons why Paul says Philemon should forgive Onesimus.

So let's take some time then to consider what happened to some of the main people mentioned in the letter. The Bible doesn't explicitly tell us, but do you think Philemon forgave Onesimus? Well, we can be pretty confident that Philemon forgave Onesimus for a couple of reasons.

One is that Paul's letter to Philemon is included in Scripture. So if Philemon had not forgiven Onesimus, the letter would have given a false impression of Philemon throughout all of history, and the Holy Spirit would have had no reason to guide that into Scripture.

And then the second reason is that Philemon likely would have discarded the letter himself had he not forgiven Onesimus. Because would Philemon have wanted the letter from Paul hanging around

if he didn't do what the letter said?

Human nature would say that he would get rid of that so other people wouldn't see that, right? So let's talk about actually what happened to the people in the letter then. We can assume that Philemon did forgive Onesimus.

[15 : 16] And here's how Mark Depper recaps what happened to some of the people. He says, We don't know what happened to Philemon. History suggests he became a pastor and was martyred. And Onesimus, in his case, history also points to him being martyred.

And Paul was beheaded for his faith. And then, of course, we knew that Luke went on to write much of the New Testament. Mark was an interesting one, though, because think about his relationship with Paul.

It was actually revived through forgiveness because remember that Mark actually caused the split between Paul and Barnabas. And then later, they must have reconciled because Paul actually requested that Mark be sent to him.

And then Epaphras was a faithful companion to Paul and he actually led the church in Colossae and then he too was martyred. And Aristarchus was also a pastor and he likely was martyred as well.

So are you seeing a theme there with what happened to a lot of the characters? And most of the people who are mentioned actually were martyred, but they weren't the ones that had the sad endings because the one with the sad ending was Demas.

[16 : 25] And Demas was the one cited in 2 Timothy 4, verse 10. And that's where it says, For Demas, having loved this present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica.

So we know that Demas actually deserted Paul, whereas the others who were martyred had the grace to continue in the faith. So in each of our three discussions then, you probably remember me talking about how in addition to being real people, some of the characters in the story actually represent others as well.

And Onesimus' actions reflect us. Paul's behavior models what Christ did for us. And Philemon's behavior models how God now views us because of Christ's actions.

So let's scan through the letter then and see what that is. You'll notice I left you a lot of space. I couldn't decide what to highlight on this part, so I decided to leave you a free-form part so that you could put your own things there.

So first, let's look at how Onesimus was similar to us. Onesimus was not seeking God whenever God saved him, right?

[17 : 29] He was trying to be reconciled to Philemon. And we weren't seeking God either when God saved us. Remember Romans 3, verses 10 and 11. Those verses say, As it is written, there is none righteous, not even one.

There is none who understands. There is none who seeks God. So we see then that Onesimus was not seeking God when God saved him, just like we weren't either.

And then the next reason is that Onesimus had sinned against Philemon, his earthly master. But we also know that all sins are ultimately against God because we see that in Psalm 51, verse 4.

And we've also sinned against God as well. Think about Romans 3, verse 23 here. That's where it says, For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.

So then the next way Onesimus is similar to us is that Onesimus couldn't pay his debt to Philemon, just like we couldn't pay our debt to God. And then, of course, we talked the last couple of weeks about how Onesimus faced severe punishment and perhaps even death for what he'd done.

[18 : 42] And we know that we face death because of our sins. Just think about Romans 6, 23 there. That's where it says, The wages of sin is death. And we also know that Onesimus needed a mediator to reconcile him with Philemon.

And we needed a mediator to reconcile us with God. So we'll look at another way that Onesimus is like us in a minute. But for now, though, let's look at how Paul illustrated the behavior of Christ.

We just talked about how Onesimus needed a mediator in his relationship to Philemon, right? And we know that Paul served as that mediator. Think about what we saw in verses 18 and 19.

And then also, here is 1 Timothy 2, 5, where it talks about us being, or us having a mediator through Christ.

1 Timothy 2, 5 says, For there is one God and one mediator also between God and men, the man Christ Jesus. So listen to that verse again. It says, For there is one God and one mediator also

between God and men, the man Christ Jesus.

[19:52] So we also saw where Paul, as mediator for Onesimus, offered to pay whatever Onesimus owed.

And I alluded to him just a second ago, but listen to verses 18 and 19 here again now. That's where he says, But if he has wronged you in any way, or owes you anything, charge that to my account.

I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand. I will repay it. So Christ as mediator between us and God has paid our debt to God. Because listen to the first part of 1 Peter 3, 18.

1 Peter 3, 18 is the verse that says, For Christ also died for sins, once for all, the just for the unjust, so that he might bring us to God. So now let's think a little bit about how Philemon's behavior models God.

We've already talked about how Philemon would have been just to punish Onesimus. And we know that God would have been just to punish us for our sins. And I mentioned Psalm 51, 4 a little bit earlier.

[20:58] But let's go ahead and look at that verse now. In Psalm 51, 4, David is speaking to God. And he says, Against you, you only, I have sinned, and done what is evil in your sight, so that you are justified when you speak, and blameless when you judge.

So the last line to that verse again is so that you are justified when you speak, and blameless when you judge. And then even though he would have been just to punish Onesimus, all indications are that Philemon forgave Onesimus instead.

And even though God would have been just to punish us, we know that God has forgiven us because Jesus paid the penalty in our place. And we could cite several verses to show this, but I just picked John 3, 16 as the one example.

And of course, we all know that one. For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish, but have eternal life. So when we were looking at how Onesimus represents us, I said we'd come back to another similarity between us and Onesimus.

And this last point not only shows our similarity to Onesimus, it also shows how Philemon's behavior toward Onesimus is similar to God's behavior toward us. And we know that by all indications, Philemon did more than just forgive Onesimus.

[22:19] Philemon received Onesimus like Philemon would have received Paul. And because of Christ's sacrifice for us, God now also receives us like he receives Christ. And you may know where I'm going with this one.

It's Ephesians 2, verses 5 and 6. So listen to Ephesians 2, verses 5 and 6. It says, He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to himself.

According to the kind intention of his will, the praise of the glory of his grace, which he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. So notice he didn't just forgive us, he's treating us as adopted sons now because of what Jesus Christ did for us.

So let's talk about some application points now. And these application points apply to the new verses that we looked at tonight, and they also apply to the whole letter. We actually have six things, but don't panic too much because we've already talked about them.

The six things are actually the reasons for forgiveness that we covered earlier tonight. Just substitute your own name for Philemon's name in those. And of course, the first thing is that we, each of us, have an unpayable debt to God.

[23:30] So again, unpayable debt is what goes into that blank. We also now have the opportunity to bless others.

So again, we have the opportunity to bless others. We still have the obligation to obey God, so that's the third one, where we have the obligation to obey God.

And then the fourth one, of course, is that we're accountable for what we do. And just as Philemon had this as a responsibility, we also have the responsibility to maintain fellowship.

And then finally, we also have the grace that enables forgiveness. So did everybody get those? We have the unpayable debt. We have the opportunity to bless others. We have an obligation to obey God. We're accountable for what we do. We have a responsibility to maintain fellowship.

[24:36] And we have the grace that enables forgiveness. So when we started Philemon, we said that Philemon is all about grace and peace. And we said that the grace and peace would be manifested through forgiveness.

So tonight's passage showed us the freedom of forgiveness. And we've received that freedom of forgiveness because God's grace has freed us from being slaves to sin, just like Onesimus was a slave.

And we can also extend that freedom of forgiveness to others because the grace and peace of God has been given to us. So I wanted to leave with just one last verse to remind you of the importance of forgiveness.

And that is Ephesians 4.32. That verse says, Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving each other, just as God and Christ has also forgiven you.

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