

Philemon: A Plea for Forgiveness
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This morning I want to begin a study of the short book of Philemon in the New Testament. It is a very short letter written by the apostle Paul to his friend Philemon. It's the shortest letter of Paul that we have in the New Testament, and it addresses a very specific situation in Philemon's life, as we'll see.

Will Brown preached a sermon on this letter just a few weeks ago, and as he and I discussed Philemon, and as I listened to his sermon, my interest grew and grew. And now I'm very excited to spend a few weeks digging deep into Paul's inspired words here.

What I hope to accomplish this morning is simply to introduce the main theme of the letter, and then unpack the greeting of the letter in the first 3 verses.

Before we even come to the letter of Philemon, I want to read some other passages that deal with the same theme that we find in Philemon. The theme of Philemon is forgiveness. This is what the letter is all about. It's an appeal to Philemon to forgive his runaway slave Onesimus. And, of course, forgiveness is a theme that we see throughout the Bible.

It's something we see elsewhere in Paul's writings. In Ephesians 4:32 Paul writes, "Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you." Very similarly, in Colossians 3:13, "as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive." There is a comparison here between the forgiveness we have received and the forgiveness we must extend to others. And this comparison really puts everything in perspective, if we rightly understand the weight of our sin that God has forgiven. God has forgiven us such a great debt. An infinite debt. If He did not forgive us, we would spend eternity in hell being punished for our offenses against the Holy God. That's the penalty we have been spared. We have been forgiven much, and the Bible tells us, therefore, we must forgive much. Just as God in Christ has forgiven me, I must forgive others.

Jesus told a very powerful parable to illustrate this point, and to illustrate the hypocrisy that is evident when we fail to forgive others.

Read Matthew 18:21-35.

Isn't this a powerful parable? It's powerful and convicting because it is what we have all done in our hearts at various points in our lives. We deceive ourselves in such a way that we can't see that we're doing it, but this is precisely what we have done. We demand forgiveness from God, thinking that He would be unjust to punish us. But then we turn around and demand punishment for the one who has wronged us. We don't want to pay the debt we owe to God, but we certainly want others to pay the debts they owe us. And we deceive ourselves into thinking that we're perfectly justified in doing this. I deserve mercy from God, and I deserve repayment from the one who has wronged me. But in reality, as this parable impresses upon in such a vivid way, we are hypocrites to want mercy for ourselves without extending mercy to others.

Forgiveness is at the very core of what Christianity is all about. Being forgiven, and forgiving others. This is what it means to be a Christian.

I want to read you a very moving illustration of this from the life of Corrie ten Boom, who lived in Holland during WWII and helped many Jews escape the Nazis.

Eventually, though, she and her family were arrested and taken to a concentration camp, where her father and her beloved sister died. Corrie survived the horrors of the German concentration camp, Ravensbruck, and she was released in December 1944. At the end of her book, *The Hiding Place*, she tells this story of speaking in a church and afterward meeting one of the men who had been a guard at Ravensbruck.

“It was at a church service in Munich that I saw him, the former S.S. man who had stood guard at the shower room door in the processing center at Ravensbruck. He was the first of our actual jailers that I had seen since that time. And suddenly it was all there—the roomful of mocking men, the heaps of clothing, Betsie’s pain-blanching face. He came up to me as the church was emptying, beaming and bowing. ‘To think that, as you say, He has washed by sins away!’ His hand was thrust out to shake mine. And I, who had preached so often to the people in Bloemendaal the need to forgive, kept my hand at my side. Even as the angry, vengeful thoughts boiled through me, I saw the sin of them. Jesus Christ had died for this man; was I going to ask for more? Lord Jesus, I prayed, forgive me and help me to forgive him. I tried to smile, I struggled to raise my hand. I could not. I felt nothing, not the slightest spark of warmth or charity. And so again, I breathed a silent prayer. *Jesus, I cannot forgive him. Give me Your forgiveness.* As I took his hand, the most incredible thing happened. From my shoulder, along my arm and through my hand, a current seemed to pass from me to him, while into my heart sprang a love for this stranger that almost overwhelmed me. And so I discovered that it is not on our forgiveness any more than on our goodness that the world’s healing hinges, but on His. When He tells us to love our enemies, He gives, along with the command, the love itself” (*The Hiding Place*, 231).

This is forgiveness. God forgive us, and then by His grace He enables us to forgive others. Maybe there are individuals you can think of right now that, if they were standing in front of you with their hand outstretched, you would have a difficult time lifting your hand to receive that person and forgive him or her. But in God’s strength, and by His grace, because we have been forgiven much, we too can forgive. This is the power of the Gospel.

In the letter of Philemon we see this in a real life situation. The New Testament communicates this truth to us in the form of exhortations, as I read in Ephesians and Colossians. And we see it in Jesus’ parables. But in the letter to Philemon we see a real life circumstance in which forgiveness is needed.

Read Philemon.

Paul was a prisoner in Rome when he wrote this letter. This was toward the end of his life, after three different missionary journeys. He was imprisoned while in Jerusalem, and kept in custody in Caesarea for 2 years. Then when he appealed to Caesar, he was transported to Rome, where he spent another 2 years in prison, before being released for a time, and then imprisoned again and put to death. During that 2 year imprisonment in Rome, probably from 60-62 A. D., Paul wrote this letter to his friend Philemon. There are four letters of Paul that were written from prison. We refer to them as the “prison epistles.” They are Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon. They may have all been written during Paul’s 2 year imprisonment in Rome, although Philippians may have been written during a different imprisonment.

This story of Philemon and Onesimus and Paul is very intriguing, indeed. The way that these lives connected and intertwined is no small miracle, and it’s quite a

display of God's providence. First, there's a man named Philemon, who lived in Colossae. Paul never traveled to Colossae (Col 2:1), so maybe they met when Philemon was on a business trip to Ephesus. And Philemon became a Christian through Paul's ministry. That's why Paul can say in the letter, you owe "me even your own self" (v 19). Philemon had become a Christian, and he became a "fellow worker" as Paul calls him in verse 1. He was involved in the ministry, and had a church in his home. Others in his household became Christians as well. Apphia is most likely Philemon's wife, and Paul refers to her as "our sister." Archippus is probably their son. Paul calls him "our fellow soldier," indicating that he, too, was involved in the ministry of the Gospel. This was a family and a home that had been transformed by the Gospel.

And if you happened to be a slave in those days, as many were, this would have been the ideal home to serve in. As Philemon and his family were changed by the Gospel, certainly those working in the home would have reaped the benefits of having a kind and gentle master. That's why it must have broken Philemon's heart when Onesimus ran away. And apparently he not only ran away, he also stole some of Philemon's belongings.

Onesimus sought freedom and anonymity in the large city of Rome. It would be a good place to hide as a runaway slave. And this is where we see God's providence in such an amazing way. Paul was in prison in Rome, and somehow Onesimus came into contact with him. Maybe Onesimus remembered hearing about Paul from Philemon, and then sought out Paul in Rome. We don't know how they met and developed a relationship, but it was through this relationship that Onesimus became a Christian. Following his conversion, Onesimus became a great asset to Paul. He served Paul while Paul was in prison, and this was a great help and encouragement to Paul during that time. And that's why it was difficult and heart-wrenching for Paul to send Onesimus back to Philemon. But it was the right thing to do. It had to be done. There had to be repentance and forgiveness and reconciliation in that relationship. So it was in this spirit that Paul wrote this letter to his friend Philemon, pleading for the sake of Onesimus—pleading with Philemon to forgive Onesimus.

As we look at the opening of the letter, I want to make a few brief observations from these first three verses.

Prisoner for Christ Jesus

First of all, notice in verse 1 that Paul identifies himself as a prisoner for Christ Jesus. In ancient letters the writer of the letter would identify himself at the very beginning, and then identify the recipients of the letter. So Paul starts the letter, as he does in all of his letters, by saying that the letter is from him. Then, in the opening words of his other letters he describes himself as a slave of Christ Jesus or an apostle of Christ Jesus. Here, though, he calls himself a prisoner for Christ Jesus. He was a prisoner when he wrote Ephesians, Philippians, and Colossians, too, but it's only here that he starts his letter in this way, by calling himself a prisoner of Christ Jesus.

I think he chooses to begin this way because he's appealing very personally and tenderly to his friend Philemon. He doesn't need to establish his authority as an apostle, as he does in the other letters, because it's not on those grounds that he is making his petition to Philemon. He's not commanding Philemon, as he says in verses 8-9. Rather, for love's sake he is appealing to him. Therefore he opens his letter with the reminder that he is in prison because of his Gospel ministry. He is a prisoner for Christ's sake.

This reminder would certainly stir up Philemon's compassion for Paul and would also be a convicting reality for Philemon to ponder as he considers whether or not to do the difficult thing of forgiving Onesimus. If Paul can endure imprisonment for the Gospel, certainly Philemon could muster the courage to forgive his runaway slave.

Paul adds Timothy's name here, not because Timothy is writing the letter with him, but because Timothy is a close friend of Paul's and probably was also acquainted with Philemon.

Then the greeting identifies the recipients of the letter. He describes Philemon as "our beloved fellow worker." These two men shared a deep comradery. Philemon had become a Christian through Paul's ministry, and now Philemon is hosting the Colossian church in his home. And in the opening of his letter, Paul communicates his affection and gratefulness for Philemon and his ministry.

I already mentioned that Apphia was most likely Philemon's wife. Paul calls her "our sister," indicating that she, too, was a Christian. And Archippus was probably their son. Paul mentions Archippus at the end of Colossians. He writes in Colossians 4:17, "And say to Archippus, 'See that you fulfill the ministry that you have received in the Lord.'" And here in Philemon he calls Archippus "our fellow soldier," referring to the fact that Archippus was engaged in the spiritual battle of Gospel ministry.

Grace and Peace

Finally, in verse 3 notice Paul's standard greeting that he includes in all of his letters. It's his standard greeting, but it is not something to ignore. It is so precious. It's the Gospel. It's grace and peace. This is what he includes at the beginning of all of his letters. "Grace to you and peace." He also concludes his letters with grace. "Grace to you." Look at the end of Philemon, in verse 25, "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit."

This is such an important word for Paul, because it's at the center of what the Gospel is all about. He longs for his readers to experience God's grace, because it's only by God's grace that we can be saved, and only by God's grace that we can be changed. We can't work our way into heaven. We can't earn salvation. Salvation is not by works. It's a free gift. It's by grace that we're saved. Paul understood God's grace in such a profound way, and he loved to proclaim the glory of God's grace. He begins and ends his letters with references to God's grace, and communicating his desire for others to experience this grace.

Peace is the second thing he mentions, that comes "from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." May you not only experience this grace, but also the peace that results it. When God saves us by His grace, He brings us into a peaceful relationship with Him. Because of our sin nature, we are born enemies of God. There's not peace, but hostility. But the Gospel is that Jesus Christ, God's own Son, who is 100% God and then also became 100% human—this God-Man came to earth to bring peace. He did this by dying on a cross and bearing the wrath of God against our sin. Jesus took upon Himself the penalty that is deserved by God's enemies, so that God's enemies can become God's friends. All who trust in Christ will experience this grace and peace of the Gospel. No longer enemies of God who deserve eternal punishment, but friends of God who will dwell with Him in peace forever.

It is by this grace that comes from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ that we are forgiven and find peace with God. And those who have peace with God—those who have been forgiven—will also have the grace to forgive others.

Philemon is a letter about forgiveness. It is a reminder that we have been forgiven much, and therefore we can forgive much. I challenge you this morning to search your heart and examine your heart to see if you are holding on to any bitterness or resentment against someone who has wronged you. Are you refusing to forgive? If so, you must be warned from God's Word that those who refuse to forgive will not be forgiven. This is what Jesus says in Matthew 6:14-15, "For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses."

That is a scary statement, because it shows us the seriousness of forgiveness. Forgiveness is not optional. We must forgive. We can't postpone forgiveness to a latter date. We can't choose to grant forgiveness only if certain conditions are met. We must forgive, just as God in Christ forgave us. And when we do forgive, it is an evidence of grace in our lives and an evidence that we truly are forgiven. It is an indication that God has truly changed our hearts and we are a new creature in Him. That's what these verses in Matthew 6 mean. It's not that we earn our forgiveness by forgiving others. Rather, when we forgive others it is evidence that we are forgiven. And, likewise, if a person refuses to forgive, and will not repent of that sin, it should cause that person to doubt whether he or she really is a Christian.

So examine your hearts, brothers and sisters. Are you holding on to bitterness? Repent, and seek God's grace to forgive. And as you sense God's enablement to lift your arm and take the hand of the one who has wronged you, then you can be assured that you are, indeed, forgiven. Thomas Watson wrote, "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 when you struggle to forgive, dwell on the great forgiveness you have received in Christ. Watson reminds us, "Our sins are innumerable and heinous: is God willing to forgive us so many offenses, and cannot we forgive a few? No man can do so much wrong to us all our life, as we do to God in one day" (*Practical Divinity*, 553).

Let's humble ourselves to see the gravity of our own sin, and then marvel at the forgiveness that God has granted. And from that perspective we can then turn and forgive others, just as God in Christ forgave us.