

Forgiveness and Reconciliation

Introduction to Philemon

Philemon 1-3

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Introduction to Philemon

Scripture

When I served as an Associate Pastor many years ago, a new family started attending Worship Services at our church. After several weeks I visited them in their home. It was awkward because their interaction with each other seemed very argumentative to me. A few months later the Senior Pastor and his wife offered a mini weekend marriage conference at our church, and this new couple attended the conference. The following Sunday morning I asked the couple to share with our adult Sunday school class how they enjoyed the marriage conference. They said that they really did enjoy it. The only part of the conference, however, that they did not need was the section on conflict resolution. I was quite surprised to hear them say that. So, I asked them to elaborate.

They said, “We don’t have conflict in our marriage.”

“You don’t?” I said, with some incredulity.

“No, we don’t throw knives and bottles at each other!”

Well, that is when I learned that definitions are important! For my new friends, conflict only took place when people were throwing knives and bottles at each other! However, most other people would say that while conflict may involve throwing knives and bottles at each, conflict also exists when there is “an incompatibility between opinions, principles, etc.”¹ among people.

And, of course, if a conflict is not resolved, it may lead to sinful thoughts, escalated tensions, broken relationships, violent actions, and perhaps eventually even to war.

So, how does one resolve a conflict? How does reconciliation take place between people who are in opposition to each other? What is the remedy for people who are clashing with one another?

¹ Catherine Soanes and Angus Stevenson, eds., *Concise Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

To personalize this, let me ask you: Is there someone with whom you are in conflict? With whom do you need to reconcile? And if so, how do you go about it?

Paul's letter to Philemon helps us because "Philemon is about reconciliation and relationships between Christians."²

Today is the first week of my new sermon series based on the book of Philemon. I am calling the series, "Forgiveness and Reconciliation." Over the next few weeks I hope to teach on forgiveness and reconciliation from the book of Philemon.

So, let's read the introduction to Philemon, verses 1-3:

¹ Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother,

To Philemon our beloved fellow worker ² and Apphia our sister and Archippus our fellow soldier, and the church in your house:

³ Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. (Philemon 1-3)

Introduction

The Apostle Paul found himself in prison in Rome (during 61-63 AD). Actually, prison for Paul was more like house arrest, and he wrote this letter to Philemon from "his own rented house" (Acts 28:30).³

While in prison in Rome, Paul also wrote letters to the Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Laodiceans (although the letter to the Laodiceans has been lost). Paul sent his letters to the Ephesians, Colossians, Laodiceans, and Philemon at the same time, probably in the summer of 62 AD, with a man named Tychicus.

² *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2001), Phm.

³ W. Hall Harris III et al., eds., *The Lexham English Bible* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2012), Ac 28:30.

Lesson

In today's lesson I want to introduce the letter to Philemon.

Let's use the following outline:

1. The Background to the Letter
2. The Writer of the Letter (1a)
3. The Recipient of the Letter (1b-2)
4. The Greeting in the Letter (3)
5. The Relevance of the Letter

I. The Background to the Letter

First, let's look at the background to the letter to Philemon.

Philemon was a wealthy Christian who lived in the city of Colossae. He had a slave named Onesimus. Apparently, some conflict arose between them, but we don't know the nature of the conflict. Onesimus then fled from Philemon and went to Rome.

It is possible that Onesimus went to Rome with the intention of asking for Paul's help to facilitate reconciliation between himself and Philemon. Nevertheless, while in Rome, Onesimus came into contact with Paul in "his own rented house." Paul shared the gospel with Onesimus and he became a Christian. Onesimus' life was transformed by the gospel of God's grace, and he became very helpful to Paul in his service to Jesus. Paul became deeply attached to Onesimus and wanted to keep him with him, in order that he might serve Paul during his imprisonment for the gospel. Yet, Paul knew that it was his duty to return Onesimus to his master Philemon in Colossae, for Roman law demanded the return of runaway slaves, and that it was Onesimus' duty to return to Philemon.

Meanwhile, Epaphras, who was the founder and pastor of the church at Colossae (Colossians 1:7), which met in Philemon's home, had recently come to Rome to seek Paul's help regarding a doctrinal heresy confronting the Colossian church (Colossians

4:12). For some unknown reason, Epaphras did not return to Colossae with the letters that Paul had written. Instead, Paul sent another one of his fellow workers, a man named Tychicus, with his letter to the Colossians, which contains instructions about how to combat the heresy within the Colossian church. Tychicus also carried Paul's letters to the Ephesians (Ephesians 6:21-22) and Laodiceans (Colossians 4:16).

Paul used the opportunity to send Onesimus back to Colossae with Tychicus, along with a personal letter to Philemon.

II. The Writer of the Letter (1a)

Second, notice the writer of the letter to Philemon.

Paul's letter to Philemon is the shortest of his letters (335 words in the Greek text, and 460 words in the *English Standard Version*), and it is addressed to an individual church member.

The letter began as follows, **“Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus”** (1a). Unlike other Roman prisoners, Paul was a prisoner because of his service to Christ Jesus.

Paul included Timothy at this point when he said, **“. . . and Timothy our brother.”** This does not mean that Timothy was the co-author of the letter. It just means that Timothy was with Paul.

III. The Recipient of the Letter (1b-2)

Third, observe the recipient of the letter to Philemon.

Paul said, **“To Philemon our beloved fellow worker”** (1b-2a). Philemon was the primary recipient of the letter. He was wealthy because he owned slaves and because the church in Colossae met in his home. We shall learn more about Philemon later.

Paul also mentioned **“Apphia our sister and Archippus our fellow soldier, and the church in your house”** (2b). Apphia was probably Philemon's wife and Archippus their son. Most likely

they, along with the rest of the church, were mentioned as recipients because they knew Onesimus and Paul wanted them to be aware of what he was about to request of Philemon.

IV. The Greeting in the Letter (3)

Fourth, look at the greeting in the letter to Philemon.

Paul said in verse 3, **“Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.”** This was Paul’s standard greeting that he used in all thirteen of his letters. John MacArthur notes that **“grace** is the means of salvation, **peace** its result.”⁴

V. The Relevance of the Letter

And fifth, let’s note the relevance of the letter to Philemon.

Paul wanted Philemon to live out the practical implications of the gospel of God’s grace. He wanted Philemon to forgive Onesimus and to be reconciled to him.

Paul’s letter to Philemon is about forgiveness and reconciliation. In what way is that relevant to us today in New Tampa? Commentator J. Philip Arthur suggests a number of ways in which Paul’s letter to Philemon is relevant to us today.⁵

A. *Christians Are Forgiven People*

First, Christians are forgiven people.

Forgiveness is of interest to all Christians because every one of us has deeply experienced the forgiveness of God. None of us come to God with any merit of our own. We came to God with all of our guilt and shame, and we confessed our sin to him. Every

⁴ John F. MacArthur Jr., *Philemon*, MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody Press, 1992), 210.

⁵ J. Philip Arthur, *Christ All-Sufficient: Colossians and Philemon Simply Explained*, Welwyn Commentary Series (Darlington, England: Evangelical Press, 2007), 216–218.

one of us was like the prodigal son who said, “I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you’” (Luke 15:18). And when we did so, wonder of wonders, he forgave us!

And then we discovered that our need for forgiveness is constant. It is not as if we only sinned once against God! We sin every day and break fellowship with God. And every time we confess our sin to him, he forgives us and restores to us the joy of our salvation (see Psalm 51:12).

B. Christians Are Required to Be Forgiving People

Second, Christians are required to be forgiving people.

We do not only sin against God. We sin against one another too. As J. Philip Arthur said, “We are not in heaven yet and we all offend in many things. Forgiveness is an ongoing necessity in all our relationships. Every Christian marriage, family and local church is a community where no one can escape the need to ask for pardon and no one escapes the need to give it.”⁶ In fact, in Paul’s letter to the church in Colossae, meeting in Philemon’s house, he wrote in Colossians 3:12–13, “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 another, *forgiving each other*, as the Lord has forgiven you, *so you also must forgive*” (emphasis added).

Actually, when Christians are slow to forgive, it calls into question their own experience of God’s forgiveness. Jesus taught the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant (Matthew 18:21-25) to make this very point. He wanted to show how utterly inconsistent it was for people who have been forgiven an incalculably large debt by God to be reluctant to extend forgiveness to someone with a relatively small debt to them. And as Arthur says, “Few things

⁶ J. Philip Arthur, *Christ All-Sufficient: Colossians and Philemon Simply Explained*, 216.

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bring the cause of God into more disrepute than Christians who begrudge reconciliation.”⁷

A refusal to forgive causes damage in a number of areas.

First, a refusal to forgive is a barrier to reconciliation. The relationship remains damaged and cannot be repaired unless there is forgiveness extended. As someone said, “Pardon withheld keeps the pain alive.”

Second, a refusal to forgive stifles the grace of God. The writer to the Hebrews said in Hebrews 12:15, “See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God; that no ‘root of bitterness’ springs up and causes trouble, and by it many become defiled.” When there is no genuine forgiveness relationships decline, mutual suspicion grows, bitterness sets in, and the grace of God is squelched.

Third, a refusal to forgive gives Satan an opportunity to work. Paul wrote in Ephesians 4:26–27, “Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and give no opportunity to the devil.” Never forget that “[our] adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour” (1 Peter 5:8). A refusal to forgive opens the door to the devil in our lives.

And fourth, a refusal to forgive will harm our relationship with God. God has forgiven us an enormous debt, and he expects us to forgive everyone who sins against us. In fact, Jesus put it very strongly when he said 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.” If we are unwilling to forgive others, then we have no right to expect forgiveness from God.

C. *People in Our Culture Are Longing for Forgiveness*

And third, people in our culture are longing for forgiveness.

The popular culture, especially as it is portrayed by the media,

⁷ J. Philip Arthur, *Christ All-Sufficient: Colossians and Philemon Simply Explained*, 217.

exalts the person who refuses to get pushed around and who gives as good as he gets. Just look at our current political climate! However, contrary to popular culture, people deep down are longing for healthy, vibrant, joyful relationships with one another. And the way that is experienced is through forgiveness.

Conclusion

Paul's letter to Philemon is a masterful letter teaching us about forgiveness and reconciliation. Perhaps you are struggling to forgive someone. How do you go about forgiving that person? Forgiveness is not an emotion; it is an act of the will. You take the first step, and you will notice God at work in your heart.

This is powerfully illustrated in the life Corrie Ten Boom. I heard this illustration from Pastor Steve Light a few weeks ago. Corrie Ten Boom was a young Dutch woman whose family hid Jews in their home from the Nazis in World War II. However, they were eventually caught and sent to German concentration camps, where all her family members died. Corrie survived, and after World War II was over, she went all around the world speaking about forgiveness. Listen to what she wrote:

It was in a church in Munich that I saw him, a balding heavysset man in a gray overcoat, a brown felt hat clutched between his hands. People were filing out of the basement room where I had just spoken, moving along the rows of wooden chairs to the door at the rear.

It was 1947 and I had come from Holland to defeated Germany with the message that God forgives.

It was the truth they needed most to hear in that bitter, bombed-out land, and I gave them my favorite mental picture. Maybe because the sea is never far from a Hollander's mind, I liked to think that that's where forgiven sins were thrown.

"When we confess our sins," I said, "God casts them into the deepest ocean, gone forever."

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The solemn faces stared back at me, not quite daring to believe. There were never questions after a talk in Germany in 1947. People stood up in silence, in silence collected their wraps, in silence left the room.

And that's when I saw him, working his way forward against the others. One moment I saw the overcoat and the brown hat; the next, a blue uniform and a visored cap with its skull and crossbones.

It came back with a rush: the huge room with its harsh overhead lights, the pathetic pile of dresses and shoes in the center of the floor, the shame of walking naked past this man. I could see my sister's frail form ahead of me, ribs sharp beneath the parchment skin. Betsie, how thin you were!

Betsie and I had been arrested for concealing Jews in our home during the Nazi occupation of Holland; this man had been a guard at Ravensbrück concentration camp where we were sent.

Now he was in front of me, hand thrust out: "A fine message, *fräulein!* How good it is to know that, as you say, all our sins are at the bottom of the sea!"

And I, who had spoken so glibly of forgiveness, fumbled in my pocketbook rather than take that hand. He would not remember me, of course—how could he remember one prisoner among those thousands of women?

But I remembered him and the leather crop swinging from his belt. It was the first time since my release that I had been face to face with one of my captors and my blood seemed to freeze.

"You mentioned Ravensbrück in your talk," he was saying. "I was a guard in there." No, he did not remember me.

"But since that time," he went on, "I have become a Christian. I know that God has forgiven me for the cruel things I did there, but I would like to hear it from your lips as well. *Fräulein?*"—again the hand came out—"will you forgive me?"

And I stood there—I whose sins had every day to be forgiven—and could not. Betsie had died in that place—could he erase her slow terrible death simply for the asking?

It could not have been many seconds that he stood there, hand held out, but to me it seemed hours as I wrestled with the most difficult thing I had ever had to do.

For I had to do it—I knew that. The message that God forgives has a prior condition: that we forgive those who have injured us. “If you do not forgive men their trespasses,” Jesus says, “neither will your Father in heaven forgive your trespasses.”

I knew it not only as a commandment of God, but as a daily experience. Since the end of the war I had had a home in Holland for victims of Nazi brutality.

Those who were able to forgive their former enemies were able also to return to the outside world and rebuild their lives, no matter what the physical scars. Those who nursed their bitterness remained invalids. It was as simple and as horrible as that.

And still I stood there with the coldness clutching my heart. But forgiveness is not an emotion—I knew that too. Forgiveness is an act of the will, and the will can function regardless of the temperature of the heart.

“Jesus, help me!” I prayed silently. “I can lift my hand. I can do that much. You supply the feeling.”

And so woodenly, mechanically, I thrust my hand into the one stretched out to me. And as I did, an incredible thing took place. The current started in my shoulder, raced down my arm, sprang into our joined hands. And then this healing warmth seemed to flood my whole being, bringing tears to my eyes.

“I forgive you, brother!” I cried. “With all my heart!”

For a long moment we grasped each other’s hands, the former guard and the former prisoner. I had never known God’s love so intensely as I did then.⁸

Is there someone you need to forgive? You can forgive because God in Christ has forgiven you a far, far greater debt than you can ever know. Take the first step. Don’t wait until you feel like forgiving. And as you do so, you will discover God’s enabling power, freedom, and reconciliation. Amen.

⁸ See <https://www.guideposts.org/inspiration/stories-of-hope/guideposts-classics-corrie-ten-boom-on-forgiveness?nopaging=1>.

Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and membership in his church family,
develop them to Christlike maturity,
equip them for their ministry in the church
and life mission in the world,
in order to magnify God's name.*

Sermons by Rev. Freddy Fritz

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PRAYER:

Our Father, thank you for the Apostle Paul's letter to Philemon.
For those of us who are Christians, we have received forgiveness from you. So, enable us to forgive others who have sinned against us.

And for those who are not yet Christians, will you enable them to come to you in repentance so that they may experience your marvelous forgiveness in their lives.

And for all of this I pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

BENEDICTION:

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and always. Amen.

CHARGE:

Now, brothers and sisters, go and serve God wholeheartedly!