

# **Forgiveness and Reconciliation**

## **The Character of One Who Forgives**

*Philemon 4-7*

**Rev. Freddy Fritz**

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# The Character of One Who Forgives

## Scripture

Last week I started a short series of sermons on Paul's letter to Philemon. One writer said, "Philemon is about reconciliation and relationships between Christians."<sup>1</sup>

Philemon was a wealthy, godly Christian who lived in the city of Colossae. He had a slave named Onesimus. Some conflict arose between Onesimus and Philemon, although we don't know the nature of the conflict. Onesimus fled from Philemon, perhaps stealing money from him in the process, and went to Rome. While in Rome Onesimus met Paul, who was in prison. Paul shared the gospel with Onesimus, who became a Christian. He served Paul very well, but Paul knew that Onesimus had to return Philemon. Along with other letters that Paul sent to the Colossians, Ephesians, and Laodiceans (although that letter has been lost), Paul also sent a personal letter to Philemon. In this letter Paul asked Philemon to forgive Onesimus and to be reconciled to him.

This is the second week of my sermon series, "Forgiveness and Reconciliation." Today I would like to examine the character of one who forgives.

So, let's read the entire letter of Paul to Philemon, although my text for today is verses 4-7:

<sup>1</sup> Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother,  
To Philemon our beloved fellow worker <sup>2</sup> and Apphia our  
sister and Archippus our fellow soldier, and the church in your  
house:

<sup>3</sup> Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord  
Jesus Christ.

**<sup>4</sup> I thank my God always when I remember you in my**

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<sup>1</sup> *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2001), Phm.

prayers, <sup>5</sup> because I hear of your love and of the faith that you have toward the Lord Jesus and for all the saints, <sup>6</sup> and I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective for the full knowledge of every good thing that is in us for the sake of Christ. <sup>7</sup> For I have derived much joy and comfort from your love, my brother, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you.

<sup>8</sup> Accordingly, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do what is required, <sup>9</sup> yet for love's sake I prefer to appeal to you—I, Paul, an old man and now a prisoner also for Christ Jesus— <sup>10</sup> I appeal to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I became in my imprisonment. <sup>11</sup> (Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful to you and to me.) <sup>12</sup> I am sending him back to you, sending my very heart. <sup>13</sup> I would have been glad to keep him with me, in order that he might serve me on your behalf during my imprisonment for the gospel, <sup>14</sup> but I preferred to do nothing without your consent in order that your goodness might not be by compulsion but of your own accord. <sup>15</sup> For this perhaps is why he was parted from you for a while, that you might have him back forever, <sup>16</sup> no longer as a bondservant but more than a bondservant, as a beloved brother—especially to me, but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord.

<sup>17</sup> So if you consider me your partner, receive him as you would receive me. <sup>18</sup> If he has wronged you at all, or owes you anything, charge that to my account. <sup>19</sup> I, Paul, write this with my own hand: I will repay it—to say nothing of your owing me even your own self. <sup>20</sup> Yes, brother, I want some benefit from you in the Lord. Refresh my heart in Christ.

<sup>21</sup> Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say. <sup>22</sup> At the same time, prepare a guest room for me, for I am hoping that through your prayers I will be graciously given to you.

<sup>23</sup> Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends greetings to you, <sup>24</sup> and so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke, my fellow workers.

<sup>25</sup> The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.  
(Philemon 4-7)

## Introduction

In the movie titled, *The Words*, a struggling young writer named Rory Jansen finds a mysterious manuscript stuffed in an old leather briefcase. Rory types the anonymous manuscript word-for-word and then submits it to a publisher pretending that it is his original work. To his surprise, the book becomes an instant best-seller and Rory wins literary acclaim.

Later in the film an old man confronts Rory and claims to be the true author of the book. The man informs Rory that he originally wrote the story in an attempt to deal with the pain of his child's death and his subsequent divorce. Tragically, his precious manuscript was lost.

Later on, Rory, wracked with remorse, locates the old man, who is working in a greenhouse tending plants. With the two of them alone in the greenhouse, Rory tells the old man, "I want to fix this."

"There's nothing to fix," the old man replies. "You just go and live the life you've made for yourself."

Rory tries to hand the old man a packet of money as he says, "This is all yours. I'm going to take my name off the book and tell everyone the truth."

The old man says, "Then you're even more of a fool than I thought you were."

Rory asks, "What is this about then?"

The old man says, "It's about my life. It's about my wife and about my child. It's about the joy and the pain that gave birth to those words. You take those words. You take the pain. Why don't you buy a plant with that money?"

The old man shoves a plant into Rory's hands and says, "Take your plant and your money and get out of here." Then he pushes Rory away.

Rory counters, "Hey, I want to make things right!"

“You can’t just make things right. Things are just things. Do you understand? No matter how you try to martyr yourself.”

Rory pleads with him, “Sir? Sir? Please!” but the old man walks away without offering forgiveness.<sup>2</sup>

Refusing to forgive others causes a great deal of pain. It is also inconstant with the teaching of Scripture. Forgiving others is a constant theme in God’s Word. John MacArthur, upon whose teaching on Philemon I am drawing, says the following:

There are no less than seventy-five different word pictures about forgiveness in the Bible. They help us grasp the importance, the nature, and the effects of forgiveness.

- To Forgive Is To Turn The Key, Open the cell door, and let the prisoner walk free.
- To Forgive Is To Write In Large Letters across a debt, “Nothing owed.”
- To Forgive Is To Pound The Gavel In a courtroom and declare, “Not guilty!”
- To Forgive Is To Shoot An Arrow So high and so far that it can never be found again.
- To Forgive Is To Bundle Up All The garbage and trash and dispose of it, leaving the house clean and fresh.
- To Forgive Is To Loose The Moorings Of a ship and release it to the open sea.
- To Forgive Is To Grant A Full Pardon to a condemned criminal.
- To Forgive Is To Relax A Strangle hold On a wrestling opponent.
- To Forgive Is To Sandblast A Wall Of graffiti, leaving it looking like new.
- To Forgive Is To Smash A Clay Pot into a thousand pieces so it can never be pieced together again.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> See <http://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2013/february/1021813.html>.

<sup>3</sup> John F. MacArthur Jr., *Philemon*, MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody Press, 1992), 208.

Forgiveness is so important that God devoted the entire book of Philemon to the subject of forgiveness.

### Lesson

In today's lesson I want to examine the character of one who forgives.

Let's use the following outline:

1. One Who Forgives Believes in Jesus (4, 5b)
2. One Who Forgives Loves Christians (5a, 5c)
3. One Who Forgives Fellowships with Christians (6a-b)
4. One Who Forgives Glorifies God (6c)
5. One Who Forgives Refreshes Christians (7)

#### I. One Who Forgives Believes in Jesus (4, 5b)

First, one who forgives believes in Jesus.

After his introduction, Paul said to Philemon in verse 4, **“I thank my God always when I remember you in my prayers.”** Philemon had been converted through Paul's ministry. Over the years Philemon demonstrated godly Christian character. There was no need for Paul to say anything to Philemon by way of correction, and he was able to thank God always when he prayed for Philemon.

Paul then noted the first characteristic of one who forgives, and it is faith in Jesus. Verse 5 is a chiasm, and so the first and last part of the verse go together. So, Paul said, **“. . . because I hear. . . of the faith that you have toward the Lord Jesus.”**

Philemon was a Christian. As a Christian he was united to Christ by faith in him. And it was because of his union with Christ that he was enabled to forgive.

Christians are united to Jesus by faith in him. Therefore, all

Christians are enabled to forgive because of our union with Christ. Non-Christians do not have the capability to forgive, as Paul described non-Christians in Romans 3:10-16:

As it is written: “None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one. Their throat is an open grave; they use their tongues to deceive. The venom of asps is under their lips. Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness. Their feet are swift to shed blood; in their paths are ruin and misery.”

Non-Christians use their tongues to deceive, and their mouths are full of curses and bitterness. But that is not the character of one who forgives.

So, first, one who forgives believes in Jesus.

## II. One Who Forgives Loves Christians (5a, 5c)

Second, one who forgives loves Christians.

Paul said in verse 5a and 5c, “. . . **because I hear of your love . . . for all the saints.**”

Philemon was united to Christ by faith in him. Therefore, he was also enabled to demonstrate genuine love for others. The love of God had come into Philemon’s life, and he was therefore able to love other people. Because he loved Christians, Philemon would be able to forgive Onesimus.

Love here is not a feeling; it is an action. A Christian, who is united to Christ by faith, is filled with the love of God, and is also enabled to love others. In fact, love is a fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22), and it is a demonstration of our union with Christ (Galatians 5:6).

So, first, one who forgives believes in Jesus. Second, one who forgives loves Christians.

### III. One Who Forgives Fellowships with Christians (6a-b)

Third, one who forgives fellowships with Christians.

Paul said in verse 6a-b, **“And I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective for the full knowledge of every good thing that is in us.”**

All commentators note that this is the most difficult verse in Philemon, because of the Greek text. And the majority of commentators agree that Paul was not talking about evangelism in this verse. The word for **sharing** in Greek also means “fellowship.” And so, as commentator Doug Moo said, Paul was “praying that Philemon’s fellowship with other believers, based on faith, might be effective.”<sup>4</sup> In other words, union with Christ also means union with fellow Christians. Philemon was not an island unto himself, but he lived with fellow brothers and sisters in Christ in the church at Colossae. And Paul wanted Philemon to know that forgiving Onesimus would enhance the fellowship of Christians, and maintain the peace and unity of the Colossian church.

Christians are bound to one another in Christian fellowship. Forgiving one another is just one way in which our bond of fellowship with each is visibly demonstrated to a watching world.

So, first, one who forgives believes in Jesus. Second, one who forgives loves Christians. Third, one who forgives fellowships with Christians.

### IV. One Who Forgives Glorifies God (6c)

Fourth, one who forgives glorifies God.

Paul said at the end of verse 6 that everything is **“for the sake of Christ.”** Literally, the Greek text is, “unto Christ.”

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<sup>4</sup> Douglas J. Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2008), 391.



Everything that Philemon did, including forgiving Onesimus, was to be done **for the sake of Christ**. Because Philemon was a godly Christian, he wanted to do everything, including forgiving Onesimus, in order to honor and glorify Christ.

The first question of *The Westminster Shorter Catechism* is, “What is the chief end of man?” And the answer is, “Man’s chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him for ever.”<sup>5</sup> It is inconceivable that someone, who wants to glorify God, would not forgive another person. Indeed, we glorify God when we forgive others.

So, first, one who forgives believes in Jesus. Second, one who forgives loves Christians. Third, one who forgives fellowships with Christians. Fourth, one who forgives glorifies God.

## V. One Who Forgives Refreshes Christians (7)

And fifth, one who forgives refreshes Christians.

Paul said in verse 7, **“For I have derived much joy and comfort from your love, my brother, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you.”**

This paints such a beautiful picture of Philemon. Paul said that Philemon was a loving person, and that truth brought much **joy and comfort** to the apostle. Moreover, because of Philemon’s love, **the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through** him. Apparently, people who had been struggling, suffering, and hurting in one way or another were refreshed by Philemon’s love for them. Interestingly, the Greek word for **refreshed** is “a military term that speaks of an army resting from a march. Philemon brought troubled people rest and renewal; he was a peacemaker.”<sup>6</sup>

When a person is engaged in conflict with another person, it can sometimes feel like war. However, when one encounters a forgiving Christian, it is like resting after a weary battle. It is utterly

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<sup>5</sup> *The Westminster Shorter Catechism: With Scripture Proofs*, 3rd edition. (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1996).

<sup>6</sup> John F. MacArthur Jr., *Philemon*, 210.

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refreshing, and one is enabled to relax in the presence of such a person.

So, first, one who forgives believes in Jesus. Second, one who forgives loves Christians. Third, one who forgives fellowships with Christians. Fourth, one who forgives glorifies God. And finally, one who forgives refreshes Christians.

## Conclusion

Therefore, having analyzed the character of one who forgives, we should forgive as God has forgiven us.

The Bible clearly teaches that God is a forgiving God. God described himself to Moses in Exodus 34:6-7a as “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.”

God’s forgiveness of sin is a constant theme throughout the entire Word of God. God’s forgiveness is most powerfully illustrated in the Parable of the Prodigal Son in Luke 15:11-32. The father in the parable had two sons. One of them took his inheritance, which was essentially a rejection of his father by wishing him dead, and left home (15:11-12). He took a journey into a far country, and there squandered his money in reckless living. When his money ran out, he was forced to take a menial job (15:13-16). Eventually, he came to his senses and said to himself, “How many of my father’s hired servants have more than enough bread, but I perish here with hunger!” (15:17). So, he decided to return to his father. Because he did not expect any forgiveness from his father, he was going to ask his father simply to accept him as one of his hired servants (15:18-19). But while he was still a long way off, his father saw his prodigal son, and then ran to him, which was definitely something that fathers did not do in that culture. He threw his arms around his sinful son, embraced him, and kissed him

(15:20). And then, in order to show his forgiveness and complete reconciliation with his son, the father threw a party to celebrate his son's return (15:21-24).

John MacArthur says, "That story illustrates how God, represented in the story by the father, forgives: eagerly, totally, lavishly. We could say, in a sense, that God is never more like himself than when he forgives."<sup>7</sup> Moreover, MacArthur continues, "If God is never more like himself than when he forgives, man is never more like God than when he forgives."<sup>8</sup>

If you are a Christian, you are in Christ. You are united to Christ by faith in him. And your union with Christ is visibly demonstrated when you forgive others as God in Christ has forgiven you.

May God help each one of us who profess faith in Christ to demonstrate to a watching world the character of one who forgives. May God help us to forgive as those who believe in Jesus, love Christians, fellowship with Christians, glorify God, and refresh brothers and sisters. Amen.

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<sup>7</sup> John F. MacArthur Jr., *Philemon*, 201.

<sup>8</sup> John F. MacArthur Jr., *Philemon*, 201.

# 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

This sermon, and other sermons, by the Rev. Freddy Fritz can be found at:

1. [www.tampabaypresbyterian.org/sermons](http://www.tampabaypresbyterian.org/sermons)
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## Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church (PCA)

*Answers for Life!*

Address: 19911 Bruce B. Downs Blvd., Tampa, FL 33647

Telephone: (813) 973-2484

Fax: (813) 973-4673

Email: [Office@TampaBayPresbyterian.org](mailto:Office@TampaBayPresbyterian.org)

Web site: [www.TampaBayPresbyterian.org](http://www.TampaBayPresbyterian.org)

**PRAYER:**

Our Father, thank you for the Apostle Paul's letter to Philemon.

Help each one of us who profess faith in Christ to demonstrate to a watching world the character of one who forgives. Help us to forgive as those who believe in Jesus, love Christians, fellowship with Christians, glorify God, and refresh brothers and sisters.

And if there are those here today who do not yet profess faith in Jesus, will you enable them to repent of their sin and believe in Jesus so that you can extend your forgiveness to them.

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!