

The One Who Forgives

Introduction. The book of Philemon is unique in many respects. The shortest of Paul's inspired writings, it is the only one of the prison epistles addressed to an individual. It deals with a vitally important practical issue. Paul takes the truth that Christians are to forgive each other, first taught in the New Testament by our Lord Himself in the gospel of Matthew (6:14-15), and applies it to a specific situation.

The Bible clearly teaches the wonderful truth that God is a forgiving God (Exodus 34:6-7). That theme runs throughout the Bible. The story of the prodigal son illustrates how God, represented in the story by the father, forgives: eagerly, totally and lavishly. We could say, in a sense, that God is never more like Himself than when He forgives, and man is never more like God than when he forgives (Proverbs 19:11).

So often our society is filled with bitterness, vengeance, anger, hate and hostility. Retaliatory crimes and lawsuits are rampantly commonplace as people seek vengeance either outside or inside the bounds of the law. But for a Christian, unwillingness to forgive is unthinkable. It is a rebellious, blatant, open act of disobedience to God. We are to forgive others as God has forgiven us (Ephesians 4:32; Colossians 3:13). In a real life situation involving two people dear to him, Paul teaches the importance of forgiving others.

I. ***The Character Of One Who Forgives (vss. 1-7)***

- A. Paul begins the main body of his letter by praising Philemon. It was not Paul's intent to flatter him. Rather, the apostle knew that legitimate praise feeds virtue and provides an antidote for sin. The virtuous character of Philemon becomes the foundation upon which Paul bases his appeal for him to forgive Onesimus.
- B. Everything Paul had heard about Philemon was good. There is no threatening language that might assume Paul felt forgiving Onesimus would be difficult for Philemon, but rather a spirit that expected he would. As a Christian, Philemon was concerned about the Lord and desired to please Him. Because the Lord had forgiven him, Philemon could forgive others. Christians forgive because they are reconciled to Jesus Christ.
- C. The type of love Philemon possessed was a love of will and choice, of self-sacrifice and humility. Love is a fruit of the Spirit and a manifestation of faith (Galatians 5:22; 1 John 3:14). Because Philemon's faith was real, it manifested itself in true biblical love. That love expressed itself in a concern for people. Philemon's concern for people gave him the ability to forgive.

- D. A concern for fellowship was also motivation for Philemon to forgive Onesimus. Failing to do so would lead to a rift in the church since Onesimus was now also a Christian. By forgiving Onesimus, Philemon would maintain the harmony, peace and unity of the Colossian church. By forgiving him, Philemon would acknowledge that he belonged to Onesimus as a brother in Christ.
- E. "Knowledge" in vs. 6 refers to a deep, rich and full experiential knowledge. It is the knowledge that comes through a personal acquaintance with the truth. By forgiving Onesimus, Philemon would experience that good thing in him known as forgiveness. Paul is confident that Philemon will want to experience a true knowledge of forgiveness by forgiving Onesimus.
- F. The goal of every Christian should be to glorify God (1 Corinthians 10:31). Someone devoted to Christ's glory would certainly forgive another as an unforgiving spirit does not glorify Christ. "Refreshed" is a military term that speaks of an army resting from a march. Philemon had brought troubled people rest and renewal; he was a peacemaker. That kind of person, Paul knew, could be counted on to forgive.

II. ***The Actions Of One Who Forgives (vss. 8-18)***

- A. Despite Philemon's spiritual maturity and deep love for Paul, the apostle knew it would be humanly difficult for him to forgive Onesimus. To help Philemon overcome any feelings of anger and hostility, Paul includes two statements about himself. He refers to himself as "the aged" and as "a prisoner of Jesus Christ."
- B. Reception entails opening up one's life and taking back the person who offended. Philemon needed to receive this slave back, because Onesimus did seek forgiveness, as shown by three facts that were true of him.
 1. He was repentant. He returned to face the master he had wronged and who had the power to punish him severely (Matthew 3:8).
 2. He was transformed. He is now useful to Paul and Philemon. He was ready to serve Philemon "in singleness of heart, fearing God" (Colossians 3:22).
 3. He was faithful. Paul had taken Onesimus into his heart and found him a great man to know and love. Philemon would find him the same way too.
- C. Paul asks Philemon not only to welcome Onesimus back, but to restore him to service. While not intending to mitigate the guilt of Onesimus, Paul suggests that God's providence was at work. God takes the myriad contingencies of human actions and uses them to accomplish His own purposes. Paul does not call for Onesimus's emancipation (1 Corinthians 7:20-22). Philemon was doubly blessed because he had a

fleshly and a spiritual bond with Onesimus.

- D. Onesimus could not possibly pay back all he owed Philemon. He had probably not found a job in Rome and Colossians implies he spent most of his time serving Paul. Paul's willingness to meet Onesimus's debt to restore his relationship with Philemon is a marvelous picture of Christ's work. Philemon, like God, had been wronged. Onesimus, like the sinner, stood in need of reconciliation. Paul offered to pay the price to bring about that reconciliation, just like Jesus. Never are we more like God than when we forgive.

III. ***The Motives Of One Who Forgives (vss. 19-25)***

- A. Although he was in prison, Paul probably had the financial resources to pay Onesimus' debt (Philippians 4:14-18). Paul's plan is to put Onesimus's debt on his account and then cancel it because Philemon owes Paul an even greater debt. Paul had taught him the gospel, and that is a debt Philemon could never repay. When someone offends us and incurs a debt, we should remember that we owe debts to others.
- B. By forgiving Onesimus, Philemon would benefit Paul in the Lord by bringing him joy because of his example of obedience and love to the church. By forgiving Onesimus, Philemon would maintain the unity in the Colossian church and that would bring great joy to Paul. Christians should be motivated to forgive by the knowledge that forgiveness brings joy and blessings to other Christians.
- C. Paul did not doubt Philemon's willingness to obey him, but here reminds him of the necessity of obeying Christ. Because Philemon was aware of the commands to forgive, Paul does not repeat them. Voluntarily, not because of law, nor out of fear, but because of love, Philemon is to obey the God who commanded him to forgive.
- D. Of all Paul's appeals to Philemon, this is the least subtle. He does not threaten Philemon, as he did the Corinthians (1 Corinthians 4:21). Nevertheless, there is a gentle compulsion in this mention of a personal visit to Colossae. The apostle would thus be able to see for himself that Philemon had not disappointed his expectations. Philemon could hardly pray to God to bring Paul to Colossae if he had not forgiven Onesimus.
- E. By sending greetings from five men known to him, Paul reminds Philemon of his accountability to all of them. Failing to forgive Onesimus would disappoint their high expectations of him. Because these men were known to Philemon, he had the opportunity to set a good example for them by forgiving Onesimus.

Conclusion. The book of Philemon ends without us knowing if Philemon ever forgave Onesimus. Paul was released from prison, as he an-

ticipated (vs. 22), and traveled extensively. One of his trips was no doubt to Colossae, where he saw for himself how the story ended.

There is one eternal principle which will be valid as long as the world lasts. The principle is that forgiveness is costly. A son or a daughter may go wrong; a father or a mother may forgive; but that forgiveness has brought tears -- there was a price of a broken heart to pay. Divine forgiveness is costly. God cannot break the great moral laws on which the universe is built. Sin must have its punishment or the very structure of life disintegrates. And God alone can pay the terrible price that is necessary before men can be forgiven. If our greatest need had been information, God would have sent us an educator. If our greatest need had been technology, God would have sent us a scientist. If our greatest need had been money, God would have sent us an economist. If our greatest need had been pleasure, God would have sent us an entertainer. But our greatest need was forgiveness, so God sent us a Savior.