

**Grace to You :: *esp Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time***

## **The Beauty and Blessing of Forgiveness, Part 1**

Scripture: Philemon 1–3

Code: 82-3

### **A NOTE ABOUT THIS TRANSCRIPT**

If you will, open your New Testament and try to find Philemon. It is tucked between – well, just in front of the book of Hebrews might help, just in front of the book of Hebrews.

Why should we look at the book of Philemon? Philemon is a very important book, that's why it's in the New Testament. It might seem on the surface a rather inconsequential book. It is only one chapter; been divided into twenty-five rather short verses. It doesn't really seem to contain any epic doctrines or any confrontation of significant error. It doesn't record for us any elements of history that would be unforgettable and necessary for us to understand the flow of redemptive history. But the Lord has included it. It is an inspired book, inspired by the Holy Spirit for our edification.

And in starting the book, I just want you to follow, beginning in verse 1, as I read it to you. It's going to be set in your mind from this reading, and that'll help you to understand what I say tonight.

“Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, to Philemon our beloved brother and fellow worker, and to Apphia our sister, and to Archippus our fellow soldier, and to the church in your house: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

“I thank my God always, making mention of you in my prayers, because I hear of your love and of the faith which you have toward the Lord Jesus and toward all the saints; and I pray that the fellowship of your faith may become effective through the knowledge of every good thing which is in you for Christ's sake. 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.

“Therefore, though I have enough confidence in Christ to order you to do what is proper, yet for love's sake I rather appeal to you – since I am such a person as Paul, the aged, and now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus – 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 sent him back to you in person, that is, sending my very heart, whom I wished 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. For perhaps he was for this reason separated from you for a while, that you would have him back forever, no longer as a slave, but more than a slave, a beloved brother, especially to me, but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord.

“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; I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand, I will it (not to mention to you that you owe to me even your own self as well). Yes, brother, let me benefit from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in Christ. Having confidence in your obedience, I write to you, since I know that you will do even more than what I say.

“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.”

A very personal letter, and behind this letter is a story, a fascinating story, a compelling story along the lines of forgiveness. This is the shortest of Paul's letters. And Philemon is a very privileged man. Paul wrote thirteen inspired letters in the New Testament, many others beyond that; but as far as the New Testament is concerned, he wrote thirteen letters. Only three of them were sent to individuals: letters to Timothy, a letter to Titus, and a letter to Philemon.

Now Paul has in mind that Philemon should forgive Onesimus; that's really what's behind this letter. So it is a short story on forgiveness, a heartfelt, beautifully expressed call for Philemon to forgive Onesimus his slave who has wronged him.

Now just remember about forgiveness; we gave you kind of a foundation last week, and I told you last week that forgiveness is a noble virtue. And, of course, Scripture not only sets it up as a noble virtue and something to be attained, something to be honored, something to be valued. But more than that, Scripture tells us that those of us who belong to the Lord are commanded to forgive. We are commanded to forgive.

I told you last week that no one is ever more like God than when they forgive, because God is a forgiving God. And on the cross even, Jesus said, “Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do,” to the very people who were crucifying Him, as recorded in Luke 23:34.

Scripture says, “It is a man's glory to overlook a transgression.” But Scripture says more than that it's a man's glory, more than it's godlike. Scripture tells us that we are to forgive one another, even as God, for Christ's sake, has forgiven us. Scripture tells us that if we do not forgive one another, God will not forgive us. Last week we looked at all of those reasons why forgiveness is so very, very important. But now let's see a story in which that forgiveness plays a very critical role.

Let me take you to the opening three verses. And whenever you're dealing with an epistle of Paul, we always deal with the opening, the very familiar opening of Paul. He does this kind of thing in all his letter. Paul identifying himself first, which seems to me to make more sense in writing a letter than putting yourself at the end. That is the old way, the ancient custom. The letter began with the name of the author, followed by the name of the recipient: “Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, to Philemon our beloved brother and fellow worker, and to Apphia our sister, and to Archippus our fellow soldier, and to the church in your house: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” A very familiar kind of Pauline opening to a letter.

Now I'm sure Philemon had received other letters, but I'm also sure that he had never received a letter from the apostle Paul of this magnitude, an inspired letter. And certainly when he was handed that letter and he read the first word “Paul,” there must have been a stunning realization that he was

receiving a letter from the great apostle himself. And when this letter was put in his hand by his runaway slave Onesimus, against whom he might have had some understandable hostility; and then he read that first word “Paul” in a letter handed to him by a returning slave; in every sense, it must have gained his attention.

The great apostle sent this letter from Rome where he was imprisoned. He tells Philemon in verse 19 that Paul had been responsible for Philemon’s conversion. So he wasn’t just a well-known apostle, he just the founder of the church that Philemon was a part of that met in his house, he was the one who brought the gospel and salvation to Philemon. Philemon must have had a place in his heart for this marvelous apostle.

Paul identifies himself in a novel way, however, never used in his other opening introductions: “Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus.” And there is a reason I think that he says “a prisoner of Christ Jesus,” and that is to let people know, and let Philemon know, and the church to which he’ll read the letter, that while it might seem on the surface that he was a prisoner of Rome, that, in fact, was not the case. Rome had put him there, but they had put him there because it was the will of Christ Jesus. In fact, it was his faithfulness to Christ that caused him to become a prisoner of Rome. You could say it was his bondage to Christ that caused him to be bound by the Roman authorities.

Paul usually begins his letters with, “Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ.” He usually begins that way because he’s emphasizing his authority. We’ve been seeing that, for example, in Galatians and in his other epistles, even when he wrote personal letters.

In the case of Timothy, he introduced himself with authority: “Paul, an apostle.” He, in the case of Timothy, wanted to do what he wanted to do in the other churches, and that is establish his authority, because Timothy needed instruction; he needed to conform his life to the will of God, which was not happening.

But here, this letter is very tender. It’s very personal. It’s very sensitive, full of compassion. It is not an appeal from authority, it is an appeal from the heart. There’s no need to refer to himself as an apostle to wave his office around. In fact, go down to verses 8 and 9, and remember what we read a moment ago. “Therefore, though I have enough confidence in Christ to order you to do what is proper; I am an apostle, I could order you to do this; yet for love’s sake I rather appeal to you – since I am such a person as Paul, the aged, and now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus.”

There’s a tone here of love that dominates this letter. There’s talk about the heart. There’s talk about feelings. And so Paul sets aside his apostolic authority to make a heart appeal to his friend Philemon, and he says, “A prisoner of Christ Jesus.” A wonderful note.

Again, he may have been in a stinking dungeon; perhaps the Mamertine Prison in Rome, which is still available to be seen in its ruins in the center of the ancient ruins of Rome. They say the Mamertine Prison was a pit in the ground, a cell in the ground. Prisoners were thrown through a hole in the top. The city sewage system ran alongside that prison and leaked into that dungeon, and made it a foul place beyond all comprehension.

Paul may have been in that stinking cell, that stinking dungeon filled with the city sewage of Rome. He may have been held there, from a human viewpoint, by the might and power of Rome. But he

was really the prisoner of Jesus Christ. And while he doesn't say that in other introductions, he does say that in other letters.

While he was in prison he wrote four letters. They are called the "prison epistles." In Ephesians, which is one of them, he says in chapter 3, verse 1, "I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles." In chapter 4 of Ephesians, "I, the prisoner of the Lord, implore you to walk in a manner worthy of your calling." Again, toward the end of Ephesians chapter 6, verse 19, he says, "and pray on my behalf, that utterance may be given to me in the opening of my mouth, to make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains; that in proclaiming it I may speak boldly, as I ought to speak."

And so while he was a prisoner he reflected on the fact that he was a prisoner of Christ, and he asked those who knew he was there in his letters to pray that the Lord would give him boldness to preach the gospel. He knew that it was the will of the Lord for him to be in prison. This was not something that was accidental.

In fact, another of his prison epistles is Philippians, and in the fourth chapter of Philippians he closes out that epistle by saying, "Greet every saint in Christ Jesus. The brethren who are with me greet you. All the saints greet you, especially those of Caesar's household." What was happening was, while Paul was a prisoner, he was winning those in Caesar's household to Christ. A strong, faithful apostle in the worst of all circumstances being used by the Lord.

Why this kind of introduction? I think underlying this introduction is something more powerful than apostolic authority. If he had said, "I'm an apostle and I'm telling you to do this," that would have some authority, that would have some weight. But to say, "Look, I am being faithful, and I am a prisoner of Jesus Christ in a horrible place in Rome. And if I can do what I'm doing for the sake of Christ and the gospel, can you please do what I ask you to do?" There's a sense in which he's arguing from the greater to the lesser. "If I can be faithful where I am to honor the Lord, can you not be faithful where you are to honor Him as well?"

And Paul was also very wise and tactful. He adds, "and Timothy our brother." Timothy's not a co-author, he is a companion, he is a brother in Christ. And this sort of raises the accountability level, doesn't it, for Philemon. Paul is asking him to do something, and reminding him that he not only has accountability with Paul, but he has accountability with Timothy who knows about this. He had been with Paul on the third missionary trip, was acquainted with the believers in Philemon's town. And Philemon was from Colossae; and that's the third prison epistle that Paul wrote in addition to the letter to Philemon.

There were other people with Paul. Do you see them at the end of the letter? There was Epaphras, and Mark, and Aristarchus, and Demas, and Luke. They were there. If you put together the other epistles that he wrote from his imprisonment, there's a mention of Tychicus, Epaphroditus, Aristarchus a fellow prisoner, Jesus Justice, Demas.

Why does he single out Timothy in the beginning? Well, the answer simply is, because he is setting him up for future leadership. When Paul was finished with his ministry, he was intending to hand the baton to Timothy; and that, of course, is the reason he wrote his final letter, 2 Timothy, to Timothy, giving him the baton and telling him to take the things that he had heard from Paul among many

witnesses and teach them to faithful men who should be able to teach others also. Timothy was to follow up in Paul's place.

In fact, in 1 Corinthians 4:17, listen to what Paul says about Timothy. His writing to the Corinthians was because there were so many issues there, and his concern is so deep that he says, "For this reason I have sent to you Timothy, who is my beloved and faithful child in the Lord, and he will remind you of my ways which are in Christ. I can't send anyone more like me than Timothy." Timothy was his primary student. He's setting him up for future leadership. He refers to him also in Philippians and in Colossians.

So Paul writes this letter with the normal kind of approach as the outset, identifying himself. And then the name, "Philemon our beloved brother and fellow worker." Philemon. His name is only mentioned here, no where else in the Scripture. All we really know about him is what we can kind of see in this letter. He is the head of his household in Colossae, if you will, which was a small town, by the way, in Phrygia, which is in the Lycus valley.

Colossae was a small town. He is the head of his house in that small town, a town, by the way, where obviously there was a church, and where Paul also wrote a letter. He identifies Philemon as "our beloved." It doesn't even use the word "brother" in the original: "our beloved," one whom he loves. He uses the term *agaptos*, which he uses a lot in Romans 16 to demonstrate how he loves the people that work with him. This is someone Paul loves. It's a familiar description of people who are intimately connected to the apostle Paul in carrying out his ministry.

He also introduces him as *sunergos*, which is a fellow worker: *sun*, along with *ergos*, from which we get "ergo" or "energy." This is a fellow worker. Paul also used that term to speak of many of his close friends also in Romans 16, 1 Corinthians, 2 Corinthians, and even in Philippians chapter 2. Epaphroditus is there in Philippians 2 identified as a fellow worker.

Paul had a lot of people who were close to him. These were ones that he loved and worked with on a regular basis. So even though this is the only time we see the name Philemon, obviously he was a part of Paul's life; and Paul had actually led him to the knowledge of Christ. No doubt their friendship had flourished. And since we have no record that Paul ever went to Colossae, there were other cities nearby, namely Ephesus was very close nearby. Laodicea was very close nearby. Somehow, while Paul was no doubt in Ephesus, he had come to know this man Philemon.

He is beloved to Paul. He is a fellow worker, which is to say there's a lot at stake here. Paul loves this man, cares for this man, is indebted to the man for the labor that he rendered on his behalf. He puts his friendship on the line then in this letter. He puts it on the line in this letter by asking Philemon to do something that was not normally done, not in the culture, not at all in the culture. He's going to ask him to forgive a runaway slave. We'll hear more about that later. He's going to ask him to give forgiveness to a man who, based on the cultural expectation, would deserve prison or death.

He writes not only to Philemon, but he also mentioned his wife in verse 2. No doubt, "Apphia our sister" refers to his wife, "and to Archippus our fellow soldier" likely refers to his son. His son would be then older, a noble person, a faithful servant of the Lord, who could even be identified as a fellow soldier.

He is also mentioned, by the way, in Colossians 4. This might be worth nothing, Colossians 4:17, “Say to Archippus, ‘Take heed to the ministry which you’ve received in the Lord, that you may fulfill it.’” That’s how he closes Colossians: “I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand. Remember my imprisonment. Grace be with you.” So Archippus is most likely the older son of this couple Philemon and Apphia. His is a fellow soldier, and he has been in the ministry. So this is a wonderfully blessed family.

Also, he writes, end of verse 2, “to the church in your house,” – a lot of history in this – “to the church in your house.” Most people don’t know this, but as far as we can tell historically, the oldest known church that was an actual church building was a modified house in eastern Syria that can be dated about 230 A.D. Up until that time, churches always met in a house. That doesn’t mean that God always intends them to meet in a house; that changed early in church history, as we see from that 230 date. But in the early years of the church, the church met in a house.

Now remember this: if you remember 1 Corinthians 1, you remember the apostle Paul saying that within the kingdom of God, there are not many noble, there are not many mighty; but God has chosen the common and the base and the lowly.” And it is fair to assume that the church was made up mostly of very poor people; and, in fact, in many places in the Roman Empire, may have been made up mostly, may have been made up mostly of converted slaves. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 1, they were the nothings, the no names, and the nobodies; and that would certainly designate slaves.

But here was a man of means. Here was a man who had a house large enough to be a meeting place for the church. Doesn’t mean the church was large, it was no doubt a relatively small church; but his house was a house that could accommodate a church. If most Christians were slaves, and some were poor free men; and if most slaves for sure, and most poor free men lived only in rooms that they rented; where would the church meet? Occasionally, the Lord had to have somebody brought into the kingdom who had a house, so the church could meet in that house. A wealthy person, a person with some means was then critical to the growth of the church.

In the sixteenth chapter of Romans, and verse 3, Paul writes, “Greet Prisca and Aquila, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus, who for my life risked their own necks, to whom not only do I give thanks, but also all the churches of the Gentiles; also greet the church that is in their house.” This is where the church was in the early years.

In 1 Corinthians 16, again, “The churches of Asia greet you. Aquila and Prisca greet you heartily in the Lord, with the church that is in their house. And, of course, as I noted at the end of the book of Colossians, the reference to the church that is in the house in Laodicea, as well as Colossae. Churches met in houses, simply stated historically. It wasn’t, as I said, until about the third century that they started to have their own buildings.

Now verse 3 is a standard greeting: “Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” That is the standard greeting. Grace is the source of salvation; peace is the result, right? Salvation is by grace, and the result is peace.

And this comes from “God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ,” and they are made equal by the use of *kai*. “God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ,” can be, “God our Father, even the Lord Jesus Christ.” This is the union of God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, identifying them both as

God, one in nature, and the union of the two would be blasphemous if Jesus were merely a man or an angel.

Thus does Paul introduce his letter. This is the fourth of the letters he wrote from prison, the only one written to an individual. Probably it's about 60 A.D. or around there, and Paul is deeply concerned about this man Philemon and his relationship to the runaway slave Onesimus; and what Paul wants from Philemon is forgiveness.

Now it's amazing how people miss that. If you read commentaries on the book of Philemon, you'll find some suggest that its purpose is to demonstrate the nature of Christian love, showing it in operation. Some suggest the purpose is to reveal the working of God in providence; and love is here, and providence is here. Some suggest it's an example of proper manners, Christian courtesy; no commands, nothing offensive, just the pleadings of love; and certainly that's here. Some suggest it's to help Christians maintain good relationships; and that's here. Some suggest that it is to show the effect of conversion on social structure; and certainly that's here. And some suggest that this is the first assault or attack on the institution of slavery; and that's not here.

It must be noted that no place in Scripture, no place is there any effort to abolish slavery, no place in Scripture. There is, however, a call to righteous love on the part of God's people in every relationship, no matter what that relationship is; whether it's in a marriage, whether it's in a family, whether it's in a slave/master relationship. But mark it. As I said, it's very likely that the Gentile church was made up predominantly of slaves; that is why Paul says in Galatians, "In Christ there's neither bond nor free."

What does Paul say about slavery? Listen to his words in Ephesians chapter 6, verse 5: "Slaves, be obedient to those who are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in the sincerity of your heart, as to Christ." That is a stunning statement.

We're familiar with, "Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church. Wives, submit to your husbands, as the church submits to Christ." We're familiar with those kinds of relationships. And we certainly affirm those.

But this seems a little bit different: "Slaves, be obedient to those who are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in the sincerity of your heart, as to Christ." Obey your husband as if he's Christ. Love your wife as if she is Christ, or you're loving her as Christ. But, "Slaves, obey your master, as if you are obeying Christ;" – that's what it says – "not by of eyeservice," – just doing what they can see – "as men-pleasers, but as slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart." You're already a slave of Christ.

And isn't it interesting that the Lord takes slavery and uses it as the picture of Christians. Jesus is Lord; I'm his slave. And tells slaves to be obedient to their masters as if they were serving Christ, because, in fact, they are serving Christ. "You're doing the will of God from the heart. With good will render service to your master, as to the Lord, and not to men, knowing that whatever good thing each one does, this he will receive back from the Lord, whether slave or free."

It's really a stunning, stunning principle: "You're a slave. Obey your master as if he is the Lord, not just on the surface with eyeservice as a man-pleaser, but doing the will of God from the heart as a

slave of Christ. Render service to your master as to the Lord, and the Lord will reward you.”

“And masters,” – verse 9 – “do the same things to them, and give up threatening, knowing that both their Master and yours is in heaven, and there is no partiality with Him.” He’s not partial to masters or slaves; but He is partial to those who honor Him.

Turn to Colossians chapter 3, where these same principles are given again in another of the prison letters. “Slaves,” – verse 22 of Colossians 3 – “in all things obey those who are your master on earth, not with external service, as those who merely please men, but with sincerity of heart, fearing the Lord. Whatever you do, do your work heartily, as for the Lord rather than for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance. It is the Lord Christ whom you serve.”

Really a stunning thing to say to slaves. You’re literally serving the Lord when you serve your master. “For he who does wrong will receive the consequences of the wrong he has done, and that without partiality.” So that’s very important. “If you have done wrong against your master, you will receive the consequences of the wrong which you have done, and that without partiality.” And then, “Master,” – chapter 4, verse 1 – “grant to your slaves justice and fairness, knowing that you too have a Master in heaven.”

A couple of other passages, because I want you to understand this. First Timothy 6: “All who are under the yoke as slaves are to regard their own masters as worthy of all honor so that the name of God and our doctrine will not be spoken against.” Now he’s talking about Christian slaves. And as I said, the church was full of them in the Roman world. They are commanded “to regard their own masters as worthy of all honor, so that the name of God and our doctrine will not be spoken against. Those who have believers as their masters must not be disrespectful to them because they are brethren, but must serve them all the more, because those who partake of the benefit are believers and beloved. So you honor your master; and if he’s a believer, you don’t take advantage of that, you honor him all the more.”

Even Peter weighs in on this in 1 Peter 2:18, “Servants,” – *oiketai*, that’s household slaves – “be submissive to your *despots*.” The word “masters” is *despots*. Strong word. We have an English word “despot.” “Be submissive to your masters with all respect,” – listen to this – “not only to those who are good and gentle, but also to those who are unreasonable. For this finds grace, this finds grace, if for the sake of conscience toward God a person bears up under sorrows when suffering unjustly.”

There were about 60 million slaves in the Roman world, some historians say. Slavery was an essential part of the ancient world. If Christians had decided to tell slaves to revolt and leave their masters, nothing but massive disaster would have happened. Any such revolt would have been savagely crushed, as slave revolts were crushed in the Roman Empire. Christianity would have been branded as nothing more than some kind of a revolutionary subversionary treason. Even if you were a slave, you were free in Christ.

And slavery had a positive side. You might find that hard to believe, but it’s true. Slavery had a positive side. Slaves were cared for, housed, fed, protected, in many cases loved and rewarded.

Onesimus was Philemon’s slave. Onesimus was a nonbelieving slave. He had run away, and he had stolen money, or something of value, from Philemon to fund his escape. Such an act was a grievous



and serious offense, with severe punishment attached, even death. If slaves were found, they were branded with an “F” *fugitivas*, and they were tortured, and some were even crucified. Running away was not tolerated, because people had valued investment in slaves, and slaves had great responsibility.

Philemon was active in the ministry, and he had a slave in his house. Onesimus decided to run away, and he ran to the place where most of the slaves would probably like to run, and that was to the imperial city of Rome, where there was the largest population of any city to get lost in the crowd. He was a runaway slave.

Slavery was not total cruelty in Rome – just a little bit of background. One study of the sacred treasury of the Romans for the years 81 to 49 B.C. included taxes for manumission – that’s the freeing of slaves, five percent of the value of the slave to be freed. Using the value of a slave as 500 denarii, the conclusion was that about half a million slaves were freed during that thirty-year period. So Rome was not overly oppressive.

The records of Augustus Caesar show that when masters died, slaves were freed in wholesale numbers. This became a problem. Because they didn’t have anyone to care for them, the government eventually limited the number of slaves that could be freed when the master died, so they wouldn’t have unemployed people on their hands.

Slaves had gained most of the rights of free men. Slaves became educated in all fields. They very often had better living conditions than free men had. There were many slaves at the highest level of Roman life and society. Free men, many, many free men slept in the streets, cheap rooms. Slaves had better food, better clothing. They were treated very often as part of the family, used to teach the children; provided health care, finances; were allowed to own property, develop financial stability, and even received estates willed to them by the owners. They were allowed to participate in all religion; and in 20 A.D., given the same rights in court as free men. So slavery then was different than maybe we would understand it.

Still, there were slaves that ran, and they ran even from good masters, as Onesimus did; because Philemon is a good man. We’ll see something of his virtue before we finish tonight. He ran.

In the amazing providence of God, he ran to Rome. And some historians guess that the population of Rome was in the hundreds of thousands; and the numbers go up and up and up. By the providence of God, he ran to Rome and ran into Paul; and Paul persuaded him by the Spirit to become a Christian.

His life was transformed, and he became a very encouraging, helpful servant to Paul in his confinement. And not all of Paul’s confinement was in a dungeon; some of it was as a prisoner with some freedoms for people to come and go when he was in a house. But Paul knew what he had on his hands. He had a runaway slave who had become a believer, who was very helpful to him, very encouraging to him, very necessary to him. But he knew there was an unresolved issue between this runaway slave and his master Philemon.

Philemon was a good Christian master. Verses 4 to 7, listen. He says concerning him, “I thank my God always, making mention of you in my prayers, because I hear of your love and the faith which

you have toward the Lord Jesus and toward all the saints; and I pray that the fellowship of your faith may become effective through the knowledge of every good thing which is in you for Christ's sake. 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." That's about as good as it gets. What an outstanding man.

But Paul has on his hands a runaway thief, and Paul knew he had to go back. He had to go back with an attitude of repentance; seek forgiveness and restoration. This is what our Lord said – right? – "Don't bring your offering to the altar if you know your brother has something against you." Right? Sermon on the Mount. "Go back and make it right, and then come and worship." This had to be made right.

The opportunity was at hand, because Tychicus was going back to the Lycus Valley, and he was going back with two letters. He was going back with Ephesians and Colossians. And it was a perfect opportunity to send Onesimus with him, and in his hand would be the letter for Philemon.

Listen to Colossians 4:7. "As to all my affairs," – he writes to the Colossians. Remember, they met in the house of Philemon. "As to all my affairs, Tychicus, our beloved brother, a faithful servant, and fellow bond-servant" – or fellow slave – "in the Lord, will bring you information. For I have sent him to you for this very purpose, that you may know about our circumstances and that he may encourage your hearts; and with him Onesimus, our faithful and beloved brother, who is one of your number." He's a church member; he's in Christ. "They will inform you about the whole situation." So Paul sends Tychicus; along with him is this runaway slave who has become so useful to Paul. And back they go with Ephesians, Colossians, and Philemon.

There's some risk in this, because Onesimus was due punishment. But Paul decides to send Onesimus with a letter asking Philemon to forgive him, to forgive him. If the gospel embraced Philemon and Onesimus, that should bring them together. It wasn't really the issue of accepting a slave anymore, it was the issue of accepting a brother, because in Christ there is neither bond nor free. Their relationship wasn't any more defined by a human classification. Oh, it didn't mean that if someone is an employee they are equal to their boss in the workplace; but what it did mean is that before God in the spiritual sense, they are equal. Paul was dealing really not with a slave to master relationship at all. He was dealing with a crime, a crime that needed to be resolved; and it could be resolved if Philemon would forgive the now converted runaway slave.

This is the heart of the matter of forgiveness, folks. This is the heart of the matter of Christian forgiveness. No matter what offense someone has committed against us, we are eager to forgive.

Here's a beautiful picture of that, and it's divided into three sections. So tonight, next week, and the following, we're going to look at the three sections of this letter. Section number one starts in verse 4 and talks about the spiritual character of one who forgives. Section number two, verses 8 to 18, the spiritual action of one who forgives. And then section three, verses 19 to 25, the spiritual motives of one who forgives. The character of one who forgives, the spiritual action of one who forgives, and the spiritual motives of one who forgives.

Now, look, we have just a few minutes to look back at verses 4 to 7. Let's take a closer look at the kind of character that belongs to those who forgive.

Paul is masterful. He is masterful here, because he is reminding Philemon of his reputation. He is describing him as the kind of man who is loving and gracious and magnanimous. In other words, he's going to hold Philemon to the standard of his own character. The description of the forgiving person's character is the description of Philemon that is already true of him.

Now how did Paul know all this? Well, I think he learned some of it from Onesimus. Somewhere along the line Paul said to Onesimus, "Where did you come from? Who was your master?" And when he found out it was Philemon in whose house the church at Colossae met, he must have said to Onesimus, "Tell me about Philemon." He knew Philemon already, and now he knew more. Epaphras, the leader of the Colossian church and a native of the town, who was with Paul, also would have filled in Paul on the character of Philemon.

Philemon had an amazing reputation. He was not a cruel master; he was not abusive at all. He was a loving man of impeccable character. So Paul says, "Since this is the man you are, I know I can appeal to you to put it on demonstration."

"I thank my God always," – verse 4 – "making mention of you in my prayers. You're a man that I am only thankful for. All that ever comes out of my lips is gratitude for you. I constantly thank God for you," – why? – "because I hear. My own experience, your reputation. But I hear from Tychicus – or rather from Epaphras, I hear from Onesimus. I hear from all around me the kind of man you are." And let's look at it. "You're a man of love. You're a man of love. You're marked by love."

Down in verse 7: "I have come to have much joy and comfort in your love. You're not only a man of love, you're a man of faith. I hear of your love and of the faith which you have toward the Lord Jesus and toward all the saints. You have faith in the Lord Jesus Christ; and beyond that, there's a faithful, loving, embracing of the church. You are a man of faith, you are a man of love, you have wrapped that faith and that love around the church. You walk by faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. You trust Him; you trust others. You love Him; you love others." This is the kind of person who can forgive.

Unconverted people, hard-hearted people are driven by vengeance, hate, and bitterness. But here is a man who's been reconciled to God through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, whose heart has been flooded with love: a man of faith and a man of love. This is a man who cares about the saints. "You have love toward all the saints. This is what defines you." Galatians 5:6 pulls them together. His life is marked by "faith working through love."

In verse 6, he says, "You have a concern for fellowship. In my prayers, I acknowledge the fellowship of your faith, and that it may become effective," – in other words – "that the fellowship that your faith has placed you into will flourish, *koinnia*. This is the idea that you know you belong; and that in belonging, your life touches the lives of many other believers. You are bound together in the body of Christ with other believers, and that fellowship is a rich part of your life. It's an effective or powerful part of your life; and I want it to become powerful, particularly in this act of forgiving Onesimus. And, further, I want this act of forgiveness to bring about the knowledge of every good thing which is in you for Christ Jesus' sake. In other words, when you do this, this is going to enhance your reputation in the knowledge of every good thing, which is in you."

And then he says, "I've come to have much joy, comfort." What an amazing man. This is a man who believes in the Lord. This is a man who loves the Lord, who loves the saints. This is a man who has

embraced the fellowship. This is a man who has experienced communion with the saints. He's talking about spiritual life, spiritual maturity. This is man whose life is all built around spiritual realities. And in that context, he's saying, "You have always brought joy and comfort through your love to me personally; but not just to me. The hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you, brother."

It would be pretty wonderful, wouldn't it, if somebody wrote a letter about me and said all that, or about you? This is a very, very blessed man. This is a kind of person who forgives. It takes character to forgive. You must be a person of faith, and love, and fellowship, and spiritual maturity and power. You must bring joy, comfort, and refreshing to the saints.

I don't know that there's any other person in the New Testament that has a more beautiful commendation than this. The Colossian Christians had their church in the right guy's house, didn't they? And Paul says, "That's the kind of person I can call on to forgive."

Are you that kind of person; because that's the kind of person who forgives. If you have a hard time forgiving, run back through that list and ask yourself, "If someone were praying for me, would it be all thanks? Would they be thanking God because of my love, because of manifest evidence of my faith in the Lord and my affection for the saints? Would they be thanking God that fellowshiping with me brings high impact, spiritual good, produces the knowledge of every good thing, that my life is for Christ's sake and it's obvious? Am I the kind of person who brings joy and comfort in love, who refreshes the hearts of the saints?"

Lord, give us a church full of those kinds of people, right? You say, "Well, where do those kind of people come from?" Oh, they're the people who walk in the Spirit, and they manifest the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, self-control.

And we all should be this kind of person. This shouldn't be some elevated standard that no one can attain to. This is normal Christian character. This is what our character should be. And when that is our character, forgiveness comes readily. More next time.

Father, thank You again for ministering to us today throughout the day. Dealing this morning with such profound concerns, seeing the whole of the human race under a curse, everlasting condemnation, and then understanding that Christ was cursed to remove us from the curse; this is the grand glory of the gospel. And then tonight, something very practical, really, very simple as having the kind of character that forgives. May we be marked by faith, and love, and fellowship, and service to one another, and doing everything we do for the sake of Christ. May we be the source of comfort to others, the source of joy to others. May it be said of us that the brothers are always refreshed by you. When we're manifesting that kind of Spirit-directed, Spirit-empowered character, forgiveness is consequential. Our hearts are filled with forgiveness.

Onesimus needed forgiveness. He couldn't have had a more noble man to grant it to him. Lord, make us like Philemon, eager to forgive all those who seek our forgiveness for the sake of the fellowship, the church, and most of the sake of Christ and His glory; and we ask these things in His name. Amen.

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