

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

## **The Beauty and Blessing of Forgiveness, Part 2**

Scripture: Philemon 4–18

Code: 82-4

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Now I want you to open your Bible to the book of Philemon. And you can check the index if you're not sure where it is; or you can find the book of Hebrews, which is larger, and back up one. The book of Philemon.

Now we go through a lot of studies, a lot of theology, a lot of doctrine, a lot of exposition of Scripture here. We major on sound theology and sound doctrine obviously. But this is not a doctrinal letter. This is not a letter that has some kind of a systematic outline of theology. This is a very personal letter. In some ways, it's perhaps the most personal letter in the New Testament.

And there is not a lot of theology here. In fact, there's really not any theology here that's explicit. All of the theology is behind the letter. It is theology, obviously, that the apostle Paul knew and understood and taught. It is also theology that Philemon knew and understood. And it is also theology that Onesimus, the other character in the story, knew and understood.

The underpinnings of this marvelous little letter are all doctrinal and all theological. And the great theological truth here is the truth of forgiveness, the priority of forgiveness. Not talking about divine forgiveness, but forgiveness by believers to others, the forgiveness that God calls us to grant.

We are commanded in the Scripture to be forgiving, and we laid out for you last time and the time before some of the reasons why we forgive. We are told in Ephesians chapter 4, verse 32, to "be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ has also forgiven you." We are told by our Lord to forgive, not seven times, but seventy times seven times. And we are told that forgiveness is a priority, and there are many reasons why. Let me just rehearse what we've already learned.

Here are the principles behind forgiveness. One: It is not murder only that is forbidden by the sixth commandment. The sixth commandment says, "You shall not kill." But it is not murder only forbidden by that commandment, because our Lord explained in Matthew 5 that if you hate your brother, you're a murderer in your heart. So anger, hatred, bitterness, malice, vengeance, revenge, and unforgiveness – all manifestations of sinful selfishness, dishonor the Lord.

Secondly, we learn that whoever has offended you has offended God greater. "And God forgives; and will you not forgive who are less offended and less righteous than God?" If God, the most offended and the most totally forgives, how can you, the least, not forgive?

And thirdly we learn that whoever does not forgive will not be forgiven by God. Matthew 6 tells us that, that the Lord will forgive you if you forgive others.

Fourthly, we learn that whoever refuses to forgive will not receive the love of the brothers. Whoever refuses to forgive will not receive the love of the brothers. We saw in the parable in Matthew where the brothers come around the man who wouldn't forgive and they essentially report him to the king – kind of an illustration of discipline. They want such an unforgiving person dealt with in their fellowship.

And then we also learned, fifthly, that if you don't forgive, but seek revenge or hold grudges or desire that evil befall someone, you have usurped the authority of God. "Vengeance is Mine. I will repay," says the Lord. And if you are the one who wants vengeance, it is a kind of blasphemy for you to elevate your pride to the point where you usurp the authority that belongs only to God.

And then, sixthly, we learned that the absence of forgiveness renders you unfit for worship. "If you have not forgiven someone, go away from the place of worship, make that right, and then come back to worship God," our Lord said in Matthew 5.

And then just to give you one final lesson, for at least tonight, that we are reviewing, your injuries and the offenses against you must be considered the trials that strengthen you. The injuries and defenses against you must be considered the trials that strengthen you. "Count it all joy when you fall into various trials; they produce strength."

So this is the practical theology of forgiveness; and we laid all of that out. And all those principles basically taught by our Lord, all of those principles were known to Paul, they were known to Philemon, and they were known to Onesimus who is the slave in the story that we'll get to know.

The pinnacle of forgiveness is the example of forgiveness given by our Lord. The greatest act of treachery done against anyone was done by human beings against the Lord Jesus, and He said, "Father, forgive them. Father, forgive them." Even though they were doing what God wanted done, it didn't lessen their culpability.

So we have then in Scripture principles of forgiveness and a model of forgiveness in our Lord Jesus, another model in Acts 7 in Stephen, who being stoned to death after preaching a sermon ending with the gospel, the Jews stoned him to death, and he said to God, "Lay not this sin to their charge." There's an example of forgiveness in the most horrendous acts of evil and treachery against an undeserving soul.

Now, again, Paul knew all of that theology. He understood all of that, and so did his friends. That divine panoply of reasons to forgive underlies this letter, because Paul is writing to Philemon asking him to forgive. He doesn't go over those principles, he assumes them. He doesn't even use the word "forgive," but it's clear that that's what he's asking for.

His appeal however is not to theology. It could be his appeal is not even based on his own apostolic authority. His appeal is to love. He goes to the highest level in his desire to see Philemon do the right thing.

Just briefly the story is this: Philemon had the church in his house, the church at Colossae. He was a somewhat wealthy individual. Most of the church were slaves or poor free men; not many noble, not many mighty. The lowly, the base, the nobodies – they made up the church. Many of them were slaves.

He also had a slave in his house who was not a believer, Philemon did. His name was Onesimus. And Onesimus did what essentially was a crime; he took something from Philemon his master and he fled. He was a runaway slave. That was a crime punishable by imprisonment, and even occasionally by death.

Onesimus ran to lose himself in the great city of Rome with its massive population and its anonymity. However, in the promises of God and in the purposes of God, he runs right into the apostle Paul, which wasn't an easy thing to do, because Paul was a prisoner. But he ran into the apostle Paul. Paul had been given some liberty we know. But he was a prisoner, if not in a prison, the whole time he was there in a house.

However he met him, he met him. And upon meeting the apostle Paul, Paul gave him the gospel. He received Christ, he was converted, he became a brother to Paul, and now he was a brother to Philemon back in Colossae, whose slave he had once been, and who he had robbed, and from whom he had fled. So Paul writes this letter back to Philemon, puts it in the hand of Onesimus to deliver to his former owner, his former master.

Now in the introduction which we already looked at, verses 1 to 7, we have a kind of typical introduction by the apostle Paul. And then in verses 4 to 7, in particular – we looked at this last time – he talks about the character of Philemon. “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've come to have much joy and comfort in your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you, brother.”

And I told you last week, I don't know of a more explicit commendation of a person by the apostle Paul than that. This is a remarkable man, and Paul is reminding him of his virtue to put him on notice of what Paul has a right to expect from him in terms of forgiveness of this runaway slave who's coming back. Paul knows Philemon. Paul had basically founded that church. Paul knew the home of Philemon. He knew Philemon, he knew his wife Apphia, and he knew his son Archippus who was also involved in ministry. So Paul is writing and, first of all, he does what he loves to do. He says everything good about a man, which essentially sort of forces him down the path of obedience to maintain the character that Paul knows he possesses.

Now having done all that, we come to verse 8 where Paul gets into his point. And I want to work through this. It's different than most texts. I want to go slowly through these verses, at least down maybe from verse 8 to 18 if we can do it, and I want you just to see this very warm-hearted, personal conversation. So let's see how he starts.

Verse 8: “Therefore,” – based on who you are, based on the fact that you are a man of character, you are a man of faith, you're a man of knowledge, you're a man who honors Christ, you are a man

who has brought much joy and comfort to the saints; their hearts have been refreshed. You're a man of love. All of this, because of who you are – “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.”

This is just a very wonderful way to motivate Philemon. He said, “Look, I have enough confidence in Christ to order you to do what is proper. I have apostolic authority, and I can use my apostolic authority, because that apostolic authority is mine because of Christ. My apostolic authority came directly from Christ. My commissioning came from Christ.” You all know the story in Acts 9 on the Damascus Road.

“It would have been right,” – he's saying – “and I'm confident enough to have done it, to order you to do what is proper, what is *ankon*, what is fitting in the Lord.” And by the way, that same word is used in Colossians 3:18 where it talks about wives submitting to their husbands; for it is proper, for it is right. In other words, this is the divine order. The divine order is that wives submit to their husbands; and the divine order is that you submit to apostolic authority. That is a divinely-ordained order.

So he said, “I could have commanded you. I could have used my apostolic authority. That would have been perfectly acceptable to order you to do what is proper.” And then verse 9: “Yet for love's sake I rather appeal to you.”

Paul has a relationship to this man that is essentially a relationship of love. If you go back to verse 1, he says, “To Philemon our beloved.” The word “brother” is added. It's in the original, “To Philemon our beloved.”

In verse 7 he talks about how this man has refreshed the hearts of the saints because he has brought so much joy and comfort in love. This is a man who loves. This is a man who's known for his love. This is a man who loves Paul. This is a man whom Paul loves. And there's no need to command a man like that, so Paul says, “I appeal to you,” *parakale*. That's the verb form of *paraclete*, which is the term used to describe the Holy Spirit as the Comforter who comes alongside. *Parakale*, *kale* means “to call,” *para* alongside: “to come alongside and appeal,” “to come alongside and encourage,” to come alongside and exhort.”

Now forgiveness is mandatory. It's demanded in the Scripture, it's commanded in the Scripture. Paul knew it; Philemon knew it; Onesimus knew it. He could have commanded; he had the authority, he had the right, it was proper. But Paul chooses the path of love.

And I think we want to always remember that this is the distinction of Christianity: we speak the truth in love. And, look, Philemon is not a sinning brother. He is not someone who is racing down a wrong path and needs to have himself brought up abruptly, and jerked, and turned around, and spun on his heels, and sent the other way. He's not a man who needs discipline. He's not a fleshly man who needs the threat of commands. He's a spiritual man, and he's a man of love. He loves, and he's loved, and he's beloved.

So the reference to authority is just – this is so interesting – just gently placed there for a brief moment, and then pulled back. It is a reality, and it lurks in the background, if necessary. But Paul wants to move quickly to love, to warm Philemon's heart to feel the love that they share, to feel the

love that Philemon has experienced in the church and from the church.

And Paul has a couple of ways to sort of elicit this love – very interesting. He says this – go to verse 9: “Since I am such a person as Paul, the aged. Please, be loving, because I’m really old.” You just don’t hear that from the apostle Paul. He throws his weight around, and commands and demands, and strong exhortations. He rarely ever cries out for sympathy.

“Since I am such a person as Paul, the aged.” And by the way, the word for “aged” there is *presbutos*, from which we get presbyters or bishops, which essentially means “older men, older men.” Sometimes used for an ambassador. But it essentially is a term for being older, being aged.

Is Paul really aged? Well, relatively speaking, yes. At the death of Stephen, back in Acts chapter 7, before Paul’s conversion he was a young man; and Scripture says he was a young man. Now these many years later he’s in his sixties, but he’s old at sixty; he’s really old at sixty. He may not have been much older than Philemon. We don’t know for sure. But Philemon was old enough to have a grown son who was in ministry. But Paul’s years were certainly difficult years that increased the aging process.

For example, in chapter 11 of 2 Corinthians, Paul tells us this. He says this: “I have been in far more labors and far more imprisonments, beaten times without number, often in danger of death. Five times I received from the Jews thirty-nine lashes. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, a night and a day I’ve spent in the deep.” – that is in the ocean – “I have been on frequent journeys, in dangers from rivers, dangers from robbers, dangers from my countrymen, dangers from the Gentiles, dangers in the city, dangers in the wilderness, dangers on the sea, dangers among false brethren; I’ve been in labor and hardship, through many sleepless nights, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. Apart from such external things, there’s the daily pressure on me of concern for all the churches.” – because – “Who is weak without my being weak? Who is led into sin without my intense concern?”

He would say that he hadn’t lived his life in a way to ensure good health in his old age. Everything in his life was contrary to surviving very long. He even says to the Galatians at the end that he bears in his body the marks of Jesus. In other words, all the scars that he had were intended for Christ. Christ wasn’t around, so they placed them on him instead. Painful, strenuous life; deprivation without food; and when he did have food it was often horrendous prison food; injuries, persecutions, and even heartsick anxious thoughts about his churches and about his own life. This tender glimpse of Paul the aged is to pluck the heartstrings of Philemon a little bit and make him feel sympathy for Paul, and thus excite love toward that sacrificial apostle who had, by the way, led Philemon to Christ. Yes, Paul was the one who led Philemon to Christ.

Now he adds this for a little more sympathy, end of verse 9, “and now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus. I’m captive for Christ.” How can Philemon possibly ignore a request like this after Paul said everything he said about him, in verses 4 to 7, extolling him to the skies? And then after Paul says, “I have every right to tell you to do this, to command you to do it. But I’m going to appeal to love, because you’re a man of love, and I’m going to ask you to respond to me because of all that I’ve suffered, and am now suffering.” It’s sort of like, “I just need somebody to love me right now and to show that love.”

What is he asking Philemon to do? What is he appealing for? In a word: he's appealing for him to forgive Onesimus.

Now the culture wouldn't have forgiven him. There would have been just punishment for his crime. It was a crime to be a runaway slave, because slaves had value. It was like stealing. And no doubt, he took things when he went, and that compounded his thievery. Paul wants Philemon to forgive this slave, and he sends the slave back to Philemon with this letter, and also Tychicus with the letter to the church at Colossae, so that the book of Colossians as well as the letter to Philemon were to be read in the church. The church in his house is mentioned back in verse 2.

Now here's how – watch Paul spell out what forgiveness looks like. Okay? This is really very instructive. Watch Paul spell out what forgiveness looks like in three steps.

Step one, this is action: Reception. Let's just call it reception, reception. Verses 10 to 14, let me read it. "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 have 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." Just a marvelous set of comments.

"I'm appealing to you. I'm appealing to you to receive Onesimus back. And with him comes my very heart, to tell you how much I love this man and how much I need him, I wished to keep him with me for the sake of ministry to me in my imprisonment for the gospel." Can you imagine someone newly converted out of paganism, who was a slave, ministering to the apostle Paul? Whatever it was about Onesimus was remarkable grace that God had poured in and through him that benefitted Paul.

"But I wouldn't do that" – verse 14 – "without your consent. I don't want to do anything, so that your goodness would somehow be by compulsion rather than your free will." Now all of this is about reception.

He knows that Onesimus is repentant. How does he know that? Because he's back. He knows that he must have been transformed because he's back. He knows there's a relationship that he has with Paul, and he's now a believer, because that's the reason he's back; and that's the essence of the letter.

Now there is a kind of forgiveness that we must give even to those who don't seek it. Okay? There is forgiveness we give even to those who don't seek it. That's why we forgive seventy times seven. People aren't going to come back to us and keep asking for forgiveness again and again; but we keep forgiving.

But this is something different. This is how we respond to someone who seeks forgiveness. And here it is: forgiveness begins with receiving the person. "I don't want to see that person. I don't ever want that person in my presence again. I don't want to go near that person. I don't want to make any space in my life for them. Don't think I'll ever receive that person again. I don't want to talk to that person." No.

When the offending person seeks to be forgiven, the first thing you do in the act of forgiveness is to receive that person, personal reception: a willingness to close the gap, a willingness to cross the chasm, a willingness to heal the wound, to bring the person back into relationship. Onesimus qualifies for that.

And as I said, that doesn't happen in situations where you forgive someone and they don't want to come back, and they don't seek that forgiveness. But we forgive anyway, because it's wrong to hold bitterness, and a grudge, and vengeance, and hatred, and anger in our heart. Verse 10: "I appeal to you for my child, my child" – another endearing term – "Onesimus, whom I have begotten in my imprisonment."

It was clear that Onesimus had repented, because he was there in the presence of Philemon. The scene is very dramatic, because as Philemon reads these words, there stands in front of him Onesimus. He has done the most dangerous thing. But the most righteous thing: he has come back humble, penitent, to face the man that he had wronged.

Paul is asking in the letter, but Onesimus is asking for forgiveness in person. Paul softens the blow of that confrontation by prefacing the name of Onesimus, verse 10, with the words "my child whom I have begotten in my imprisonment." Like Timothy, like Titus, and like Philemon, this fugitive slave is Paul's spiritual son.

Paul was a human instrument God used to save him. Now when he says, "whom I have begotten in my imprisonment," he doesn't mean that apart from the grace of God he was begotten. No. He means that he is his father in the sense that he dispensed to him the gospel by which the Spirit of God gave him life and salvation. Paul identifies himself as a spiritual father in other places as well.

So repentant Onesimus is standing there. He's humble. He's in the dangerous position of having stepped right back into the consequences of his crime. He is looking into the eyes of the one against whom he committed that crime, and he comes as a forgiven sinner. He left as merely a slave; he comes back now as a brother in Christ. He has been transformed.

Verse 11 tells us about that transformation, "who formerly was useless to you." This is a play on words. Onesimus means "useful." Onesimus means "useful."

By the way, Onesimus is a very common slave name, so it may have become nickname. Maybe good slaves were just called useful, and bad ones were called useless. It's almost as like it's a nickname rather than a given name. And nobody cared about the family of a slave anyway.

Onesimus, meaning "useful" indicates, perhaps, something of the fact that he was a useful slave, but he became useless, and "now is useful both to you and to me." Through the transformation of the gospel, he has become more useful than he ever was before. Useful became useless; but he has become useful to the transforming power of God in the gospel. God has changed him radically, radically.

In the letter to the Colossians, which would have been delivered at the same time, in chapter 3 we read this in verses 22 and 23: "Slaves, in all things obey those who are your masters 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.”

So the fact that – listen – the fact that Onesimus was coming back as a runaway slave and needed to be received was, in a sense, restoring – listen – the master/slave relationship. It was restoring the master/slave relationship. And if Onesimus wondered about that, all he had to do was read the other letter, which he would have read to the church, in which the instruction from the apostle is, “Slaves, in all things obey those who are your masters, and do it with sincerity of heart, fearing the Lord. Do it heartily, as for the Lord.”

So, look, this does not obviate the slave relationship. He is telling Philemon, “Forgive him, and take him back as a more useful slave.” And he upheld that in the letter to the Colossians.

In the letter to the Ephesians it’s helpful to read 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; not by way of eyeservice, as men-pleasers, but as slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart.” If you’re a Christian slave, you’re not only a slave to your master, you’re a slave to Christ.

“No more eyeservice,” – meaning you only do what he can see you do to please him – “now you please the Lord in everything you do. Go back, Onesimus. Go back to Philemon and be a far more useful slave to your master, and do it as unto the Lord Himself.”

He was useful, not just to Philemon, Paul says at the end of verse 11, “but to me, to me.” He had been with Paul, we don’t know how long. He is now living up to his name. He is a totally new person.

And verses 12 to 14 tell us he had been proven faithful. Let’s follow the text. “I’ve sent him back to you in person, that is, sending my very heart.” Along with, as I said, Tychicus, to go along with Onesimus, they brought back the letter to Philemon and the letter to the church in Colossae, which met in his house.

And Paul says about him, “I’m sending my very heart, my very heart.” It’s actually the word in the Greek for “bowels.” The inside strong, emotional feeling Paul had for this man.

We wish we knew more about him. This is the only place he’s ever mentioned, this useful – if that was his nickname. We don’t know what his real name was. This criminal Phrygian runaway slave had become faithful, and he had become useful to Paul, so useful that Paul would rather have had him stay to minister to him in his imprisonment. Amazing to think that this man could minister to the great apostle Paul. In sending him, he was literally sending his heart. Paul knows this Onesimus. He knows his character; he knows the transformation; he knows his faithfulness.

And in verse 13 he says, “whom I wished to keep with me, so that on your behalf he might minister to me in my imprisonment for the gospel.” There’s a tender phrase there: “so that on your behalf he might minister to me.”

What do you mean that “in your behalf”? Again, he affirms the gracious, loving character of Philemon. He’s so tender with this man. He’s assuming that if Philemon knew how much Onesimus meant to him, if Philemon knew how important Onesimus had become to Paul, if Philemon knew the



suffering Paul was in and how he was strengthened by this man Onesimus, Philemon would have wanted him to stay. Philemon would have wished him to stay. Philemon might have insisted that he stay in Rome and act as Philemon's own gift to Paul to do what Philemon would have done for Paul if he could have.

It's beautifully expressed, "who formerly was useless to you, but now is useful both to you and me, whom I wished to keep with me," – verse 13 – "so that on your behalf he might minister to me," which is to say, "I know you want to minister to me, and I know I believe if you had a choice, you'd have told him, 'Stay with Paul.' But without your consent," – verse 14 – "without your consent I didn't want to do anything, so that your goodness would not be, in effect, by compulsion but of your own free will."

Paul again mentions his imprisonment. He rattles his chains again for the fourth time in this brief letter. Paul takes the high ground and says, "I know your goodness." He rehearsed it in verses 4, 5, 6, and 7. "I didn't want to presume on your goodness. I didn't want your goodness to be taken for granted. I didn't want your goodness to be the only option by compulsion. I'm sending him back, because I truly believe in the nobility of your spiritual life. I believe you are a man whom God has made righteous, and so I wouldn't presume to keep him here without your consent, as it were, by compulsion. But I want you to have the choice of your own free will."

There's something beautiful here. Paul puts Philemon in a position where he makes the sacrifice. This is so wonderful. Philemon is the one that's been offended; Philemon needs to be the one who rises above the offense and shows that he also has been transformed as Onesimus has. Philemon needs to make this choice out of the God-given goodness of his own heart. He needs to make it as an act of his sanctified will. And he needs to be the one, if it's going to happen, who says, "I will sacrifice him for you."

There's something so wonderful about discipling people in such a way that you put them in the position to demonstrate their goodness. If you try to disciple people by controlling everything they do, they never have the opportunity to demonstrate their goodness, they never have the opportunity to make a sacrifice if they're trapped in a situation where all they can do is what you tell them to do.

If I've learned anything through the years and years of leadership, I have learned that the best way to lead is to assume the best out of everyone, and to tell them that you want them to put that spiritual goodness on display. You speak to them not out of authority, but you speak to them out of love, and you ask them to do what their own sanctified heart compels them to do to display their own goodness, so that people can see their goodness and their virtue. And you give them the opportunity to make sacrifices, so that goodness is on display.

Paul wants Philemon to receive Onesimus in love, reconcile the broken relationship. That's step one. Step two, this is important. First step: reconcile the relationship. Second step: restore to service, restore to service.

He says back in verse 11, "He is now useful to you and to me." But notice verse 15. "For perhaps he was for this reason separated from you for a while, that you would have him back forever."

Paul doesn't mitigate the guilt of Onesimus, he doesn't. But what Paul does say is, "Consider" – listen carefully – "the providence of God. Consider the providence of God. You meant it for evil,

Onesimus; God meant it for good,” Genesis 50:20. “Consider the providence of God. God is always triumphing over sin by His providential power and grace. Think about it. He may have been useful to you; he became useless to you so that God could bring him back. And now he is not merely a slave able to minister on a temporal level and serve on a temporal level, he is a brother able to serve on a spiritual level. He is far more useful because of the powerful providence of God.”

I love the fact that in verse 15 he uses the word “perhaps,” because no one can pull the curtain aside. He says “perhaps,” because no one can look behind the curtain and see the secret movement of God. “Perhaps” is a fair way to say it. “Perhaps,” even though such things are secret and known only to God, it is a reasonable assumption, especially for an inspired writer to say God allowed it, and then God overruled it. It was a temporary separation to lead to an eternal union, a temporary separation to lead to an eternal union.

Typically, what Onesimus had done would have generated irreparable damage to the trust of Philemon. But where God is at work, all that goes away. He comes back, verse 16, “no longer as a slave,” merely. This is not a call for emancipation. This is not a call to Philemon to set him free, not at all, because we just read Colossians 3: “Slaves, obey your masters.”

Listen to the language of 1 Corinthians 7, 1 Corinthians 7 and verse 22: “For he who was called in the Lord while a slave, is the Lord’s freedman; likewise he who was called while free, is Christ’s slave.”

There’s never a call for emancipation. If you were called savingly, if you were saved as a slave, you’re still a slave, but you’re the Lord’s freeman. Conversely, if you are called as a freeman, you have now become Christ’s slave. To put it simply for Onesimus: he was Philemon’s slave in an earthly sense, and Christ’s slave in a heavenly sense. He is more than a slave, more; not just a slave, but more than a slave.

In Colossians 3, again using that book particularly, because it was in the hand of Tychicus right there handed to Philemon, verse 11 of chapter 3, it says, “There is no distinction between Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and freeman; Christ is all, and in all.”

He comes back socially, as far as social structure goes. “He comes back as your slave.” That was a workable relationship, an economic relationship in ancient times that no Bible character tried to overturn. Our Lord didn’t do it, neither did the apostles. “But now he’s not just someone who is a slave to you,” – and by the way, slave conjures up in most people’s minds horrible things. Not so in that setting. A slave was like a family member, part of the family, cared for, loved by the family. If you have any more questions about that, get the book I wrote called *Slave*, and all of it is explained there. But he is not just a slave, he is now a beloved brother, beloved brother. “It is time for you to acknowledge him as your brother.”

Listen to Titus 2:9. “I urge bondslaves to be subject to their own masters in everything, slaves to be subject to their own masters in everything, well-pleasing, not argumentative, not stealing, but showing all good faith so that they will adorn the doctrine of God our Savior in every respect.” It fell to slaves to be good slaves who are believers so they could adorn the doctrine of God. We’re not talking about chains and whips, we’re talking about an employment relationship in which someone was cared for, protected, and paid, and supplied, and nurtured by a family. It was that kind of slavery

that became the pattern for our relationship to our Lord Jesus Christ.

So he comes back, “and I want you to receive him back, no longer as a slave, but more than a slave,” – verse 16 – “a beloved brother, especially to me, but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord, as one who serves you physically and one who will serve you spiritually.”

So what do we do in this work of forgiveness? First, there is reception to relationship. Then there is restoration to usefulness, ministry. There’s a third step: restitution for wrong, restitution.

Come down to verses 17 and 18. “If then you regard me a partner, a *koinnon*, a fellow sharer, if 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.” There needed to be restitution. Whatever Philemon had lost, whatever he had to spend to replenish whatever he had stolen, Paul says, “If I’m a fellow sharer with you, if we’re in spiritual fellowship together, accept him as you would me. Treat him as if it were me. Welcome him. Forgive him as if you were forgiving me. Accept him as if you were accepting me.”

And then this marvelous verse 18: “If he’s wronged you in any way or owes you anything, charge that to my account.” Restitution is always the final component of forgiveness. Onesimus must show his genuineness by being willing to repay, willing to restore. But Onesimus doesn’t have anything with which to do that. How is he going to pay the debt? He has no resources to pay the debt.

In the letter to the Colossians, again, chapter 3, verse 25, “He who does wrong will receive the consequences of the wrong he has done, and that without partiality.” He had done wrong, there had to be some consequences; restitution had to be made. Onesimus had no ability to make that restitution. The one forgiven must be willing to make restitution, to make his offense right. Like the prodigal who came home, and musing to himself he said, “I’ll go home and I’ll work for my father, and I’ll earn back everything that I took and wasted.” It never happened, because the father, you remember, embraced him in grace.

There were in Israel laws of restitution. The Old Testament laid them out. Justice demanded, justice deserved full restitution. But in order to make this relationship complete, since Onesimus couldn’t pay, somebody had to pay in his place. This is a Christlike act, isn’t it, on the part of Paul. Christ paid the debt for us; Paul pays the debt for Onesimus. Here Paul offers himself as the substitute to pay Onesimus’ debt. This is Paul in a Christlike way, bringing together the last part of the restored relationship between Philemon and Onesimus.

This is exactly what Christ does for us. We have a debt we can’t pay; He pays our debt to restore us to God. This is Christlike. And I say what I said at the beginning of the series: you are never more like Christ than when you – what? – forgive. What a picture of Christ.

Now there’s one section left for next week. But we need to go or we’re going to have a thousand children running loose out there without mom and dad. Let’s bow in prayer.

What a wonderful and blessed day we’ve had together in Your Word, Father. We’re so deeply grateful for all its truth, its insight, its instruction. We are so rich. We are the richest of the rich because we know You, the true and living God and Your Son the Lord Jesus Christ. And we live in

knowledge that is provided for us through the revelation of Scripture authored by the Holy Spirit who lives in us as our teacher, our guide. We are so blessed to know the truth, to know You, to know wisdom and understanding regarding Your plan, plan of redemption in the world. May we have opportunity even this week, Lord, to proclaim this truth to many around us, so that they can come to know the full forgiveness and full reconciliation that sinners can have with you because their sins are put to the account of Christ. We see the beauty of the gospel even in Paul's loving gesture.

Give us a wonderful evening together. We thank You that we can enjoy so many rich blessings; and make this evening one of them we pray in the name of Christ. Amen.

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