

The Imperative of Forgiveness

Philemon 1-7

Forgiveness is something that every Christian needs to have received and needs to give. The difficulty in dealing with a topic like forgiveness is that everyone pleads innocent. That is, everyone claims that they have forgiven everyone who has harmed them, and stand in no need of forgiveness from anyone else. In rare cases, where the injury has been great, a person will admit – I haven't forgiven so-and-so, or I can't forgive him or her. But for the most part, everyone claims to have forgiven everyone in their life. Everyone takes the moral high ground and says, “I have no bitterness in my heart.”

Now it's hard to calculate just how many ways we are sinned against in our short lives. Our parents harm us. Our siblings harm us. Our friends harm us. Our teachers harm us. Our fellow Christians harm us. When you start to count it up, there are a huge amount of debts we have to forgive others for. Put simply, forgiveness is something that has to be part of your everyday life. Then you add to that the many, many ways that we have harmed others; how many debts we have incurred with others – there is a lot of giving and receiving of forgiveness that needs to happen.

What most people do is measure their emotional state to check if they have forgiven everyone. If they feel relatively calm, not angry, resentful, furious or steamed up inside, they assume they have no bitterness inside them. They assume they have forgiven everyone in their lives.

But that is not the way to judge whether you have forgiven. It is also not the way to judge if you need forgiveness from someone else – by looking to see if someone is angry at you or not. Forgiveness is not primarily measured by emotional states.

You will find someone who feels perfectly calm with someone else and will insist that they have forgiven them, based on their calm feelings. But wait until there is a repeat offence, and you will find that one is able to perfectly recite the previous offences. He or she never really forgave; they just became less noticeably angry. But in truth, that person's sin was entered into the moral accounting books as an I.O.U., waiting to be hauled out at another time.

You know that many, many people have not forgiven. not only because of the way they can pull out past offences, but because they live with a guilty conscience and a dulled spiritual sensitivity. When people refuse to forgive, their consciences berate them, because they know that that is not how they want to be treated. They want others to forgive them. When people do not forgive, they walk around with the guilty conscience that robs them of boldness before God and man (Prov 28:1).

If we are insensitive to the many ways in which we have not forgiven others, you can probably multiply that number when it comes to the forgiveness we should have asked for from others. Again, people look to see if so-and-so is still speaking to me, still greet me with a smile – well, then, there's no problem.

You find marriages that operate on this principle – sin against each other, feel calm, and pretend there was no offence. Churches operate like this – people sinning against each other as a pattern, ignoring it and judging by their emotional state that forgiveness has taken place.

So as we begin this series in Philemon, let me encourage you to set aside your own judgement of forgiveness and let the Bible search you. It may be that you have simply hardened your heart. It may simply be that you have rationalised your own unforgiveness. It may be that you have set up your own standard of what it means to forgive and be forgiven.

The book of Philemon is a real-life story of forgiveness. The main characters are Paul, who is

writing the letter; Philemon, a Christian man who probably housed the Colossian church in his home and Onesimus, one of Philemon's runaway slaves.

Let's piece the story back together by looking at a few Scriptures in this book. Philemon was a member of the church at Colosse, his wife was probably Apphia, and their son Archippus. As verse 2 puts it, he probably housed the church in his own home.

Philemon 1:1-2 *Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, To Philemon our beloved friend and fellow laborer, ² to the beloved Apphia, Archippus our fellow soldier, and to the church in your house:*

This means that Philemon was probably a wealthy man, and as was the economy of the time, he would have owned some slaves.

Slavery in Roman times was an interesting thing. Slaves made up over one third of the population of the Empire. Slaves were not simply muscled brutes doing physical labour. Many slaves were doctors, teachers, cooks, accountants, musicians. Although they did not have the legal rights of freemen, by Paul's time many of them were better off than freemen – often being assured of food, clothing, shelter, while freemen had to fend for themselves. Many slaves earned their own freedom over time, and many formed close friendships with their masters. So it wasn't necessarily an ungodly thing for a Christian like Philemon, to own slaves. As much as slavery was often an abuse, Peter and Paul don't write against slavery as an institution. They write that Christian masters must treat their slaves fairly, justly and gently. Christian slaves are told to submit, to work diligently, and to serve Christ with their work and attitude. And we can give Philemon the benefit of the doubt that that is exactly how he treated his slaves.

At some point Philemon came to know Jesus Christ as Saviour through Paul's ministry. Paul says this in verse 19

I, Paul, am writing with my own hand. I will repay -- not to mention to you that you owe me even your own self besides.

Though Paul had never personally been to the area, Philemon had probably heard him in Ephesus or somewhere else.

Onesimus was one of Philemon's slaves. It seems he was an unbeliever, and at a certain point, chose to run away from his master. More than likely, when he did, he stole some goods and money as well, to keep himself going. Paul alludes to that later, when saying he will repay Philemon anything owing.

You have to understand something of what that meant. For a slave to run away was not the same as giving your boss 24 hours notice. For a slave to run away was a criminal act. Slaves were the property of their masters. Rome knew that if slaves thought lightly of running away from their masters, their whole economy could collapse, so runaway slaves faced severe penalties. Some were beaten severely. Some were branded with a 'F' on their heads for *fugitivus*. Some were crucified. A runaway slave had no claims, no rights, and no expectation of forgiveness.

A runaway slave hurt his or her master. The master had often spent a lot of money to purchase them. There was huge cost in terms of replacing them, or tracking them down, or buying a new one. And if the master had been kind to his slaves, there would have been a sense of personal betrayal.

Onesimus made his way to Rome, trying to lose himself in the crowds. But in God's providence something else happened. He met up with Paul. How that happened we don't know, but somehow Onesimus got in contact with Paul. And under Paul, Onesimus was converted. Onesimus had not only been running away from Philemon, but from God. In His mercy, God had Onesimus meet up with Paul, hear the Gospel, and repent.

Philemon 1:10-11 *I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, whom I have begotten while in my chains, ¹¹ who once was unprofitable to you, but now is profitable to you and to me.*

Philemon 1:15-16 *For perhaps he departed for a while for this purpose, that you might receive him forever, ¹⁶ 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.*

The name Onesimus actually means profitable. As a runaway, he was unprofitable, but now as a believer, he was profitable to Paul and to Philemon. In fact, he had become something of a helper and a servant to Paul. His new-found faith filled him with a servant's heart and spirit, and he was now being used by God in ministry. He was so useful that Paul was tempted to just keep him by his side, as a now-saved, representative of Philemon's household – Philemon having lost, but Paul having gained.

Philemon 1:12-13 *You therefore receive him, that is, my own heart, ¹³ whom I wished to keep with me, that on your behalf he might minister to me in my chains for the gospel.*

But as much as Paul wanted to do that, he knew he couldn't.

Philemon 1:14 *But without your consent I wanted to do nothing, that your good deed might not be by compulsion, as it were, but voluntary.*

He knew that Onesimus had sinned against Philemon. He knew that repentance, forgiveness and restitution were going to be necessary for the situation to please God. Paul wanted more from Onesimus than to simply ask God for forgiveness. He wanted more than Philemon to simply say, "I have forgiven in my heart" He wanted Onesimus to return to Philemon to ask for forgiveness, and to return himself to Philemon's service. He wanted Onesimus to ask for forgiveness, and he wanted Philemon to receive Onesimus and grant forgiveness.

Philemon 1:17-20 *If then you count me as a partner, receive him as you would me. ¹⁸ But if he has wronged you or owes anything, put that on my account. ¹⁹ I, Paul, am writing with my own hand. I will repay -- not to mention to you that you owe me even your own self besides. ²⁰ Yes, brother, let me have joy from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in the Lord.*

Now remember, that under Roman law, Philemon had the right to punish Onesimus as he saw fit. In fact, under Roman law, it was rather expected that he do so. Other slaves would have been watching to see how Philemon responded to this. Other masters would have been watching as well. But now there was a new dynamic – Onesimus was a believer. He and Philemon were now brothers. Philemon's testimony as a Christian was also on the line. How could Philemon show both justice and mercy? When you think about it, that is what God had to do to save any one of us. He had to show both justice and mercy. And He did so on the cross of Christ.

Now you might ask why God would have included this book in the Bible. Why did He include this very personal letter as part of His eternal Word? The answer is this: Because forgiveness is such an important part of the Christian life that God saw fit to give us a real life parable of forgiveness to drive all the main points of forgiveness home.

The book of Philemon teaches us the **imperative** to forgive, the **basis** of forgiveness as well as the **actions** of forgiveness.

Today we want to examine the Imperative of forgiveness.

In Paul's words to Philemon we read of three reasons why forgiveness is crucial to the Christian life. These reasons are repeated elsewhere in Scripture as well. The three reasons are found in verses 4 through 7. The reason we know that is the first word of verse 8 – 'therefore'. In verse 8 Paul begins his appeal to Philemon to forgive Onesimus, and he starts it with 'therefore'. In other words – in light of the things I have just said in verses 4 to 7, Philemon, you must forgive.

So what are the reasons Paul gives Philemon for forgiving Onesimus?

I. You Must Forgive For Your Soul's Sake

Paul addresses Philemon with words of praise.

Philemon 1:4-5 *thank my God, making mention of you always in my prayers, ⁵ hearing of your love and faith which you have toward the Lord Jesus and toward all the saints,*

Now why does Paul say this to Philemon? Is Paul a flatterer? Is Paul trying to butter Philemon up before he hits him with the hard stuff? No, Paul is saying Philemon is a Christian. Paul has heard of two things about Philemon which belong to a regenerate, born-again believer – love and faith, not just any love and faith, but love and faith towards Jesus Christ, and towards those who belong to Jesus Christ.

This is a strong statement that Paul believes Philemon is a born-again Christian.

1 Corinthians 16:22 *If anyone does not love the Lord Jesus Christ, let him be accursed. O Lord, come!*

1 John 3:14 *We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love the brethren. He who does not love his brother abides in death.*

Only true believers love the Lord Jesus and believe in Him and love the body of Jesus.

Furthermore, what does Paul call Philemon in verses 7 and verse 20? Brother. What does he call him in verse 1? A co-labourer. Now what does all this mean?

If you address someone as a Christian, then what do you expect from them? You expect them to behave as a Christian. One of the clearest marks of a believer is that a believer forgives. Paul is setting the stage to call on Philemon to forgive Onesimus because Philemon is a Christian and Christians forgive. If Philemon did not forgive, it would place a question mark over his own salvation. The simple truth is Christians ought to forgive, because they have been forgiven. This is the main point of Jesus' parable in Matthew 18.

Matthew 18:23-35 *Therefore the kingdom of heaven is like a certain king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. ²⁴ "And when he had begun to settle accounts, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents. ²⁵ "But as he was not able to pay, his master commanded that he be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and that payment be made. ²⁶ "The servant therefore fell down before him, saying, 'Master, have patience with me, and I will pay you all.' ²⁷ "Then the master of that servant was moved with compassion, released him, and forgave him the debt. ²⁸ "But that servant went out and found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii; and he laid hands on him and took him by the throat, saying, 'Pay me what you owe!' ²⁹ "So his fellow servant fell down at his feet and begged him, saying, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you all.' ³⁰ "And he would not, but went and threw him into prison till he should pay the debt. ³¹ "So when his fellow servants saw what had been done, they were very grieved, and came and told their master all that had been done. ³² "Then his master, after he had called him, said to him, 'You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you begged me. ³³ 'Should you not also have had compassion on your fellow servant, just as I had pity on you?' ³⁴ "And his master was angry, and delivered him to the torturers until he should pay all that was due to him. ³⁵ "So My heavenly Father also will do to you if each of you, from his heart, does not forgive his brother his trespasses."*

People who do not forgive when they have been forgiven, are acting out an extreme form of hypocrisy, particularly so because of the size of the debt we have been forgiven, if compared to the size of debts incurred against us.

So, if a Christian does not forgive does that mean they lose their salvation? No, if a person harbours ongoing bitterness and refuses to forgive, it may reveal that they have never experienced the joy of

forgiveness themselves. It may reveal they have never been saved.

That is part of the meaning behind the Scripture which says: **Matthew 6:14-15** *"For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. ¹⁵ "But if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.*

Certainly it has applications for our fellowship with God. But it also reveals that the unforgiven do not forgive. The forgiven forgive.

If you profess Jesus as Saviour, but you harbour bitterness and malice and anger in your heart towards someone else, so that you would not bless them or pray for them or do good to them – the Bible has something to say to you:

1 John 3:14-15 *We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love the brethren. He who does not love his brother abides in death. ¹⁵ Whoever hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him.*

1 John is a book dedicated to listing the outward and inward evidences of eternal life. Peter told us to look for the evidences

2 Peter 1:10 *Therefore, brethren, be even more diligent to make your call and election sure, for if you do these things you will never stumble;*

Therefore, as one of the means by which we continue in the faith, by which we make our calling and election sure is to forgive others as we have been forgiven. You do not forgive to earn salvation, but you do forgive to make sure that such salvation is actually true of you.

Paul began by commending Philemon for his love for the saints. Now that Onesimus is counted amongst the saints, how must Philemon act towards him? In love – and that means forgiveness.

II. You Must Forgive For Your Joy's Sake

What effect did Philemon have on others? In verse 4, Paul says what he does when he thinks of Philemon:

I thank my God, making mention of you always in my prayers,

Again, Paul says what Philemon's ministry does in verse 7 and verse 20.

Philemon 1:7 *For we have great joy and consolation in your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed by you, brother.*

Philemon 1:20 *Yes, brother, let me have joy from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in the Lord.*

Paul uses this term 'refresh' twice. It is the same word Jesus used when He said "Come unto me all you that labour and are heavy-laden, and I will give you *rest*. Philemon is like a fountain that people have come to drink, and they have walked away encouraged, blessed, and instructed. That's a happy picture, isn't it? Paul says we have had great joy from you (v7), and he asks for more joy in verse 20.

Philemon is not a mean-spirited, thin-blooded, narrow old miser who scowls at the world, has contempt for most and bears the grudges of a thousand injuries. Philemon is a joy-giving man. And it seems that Paul mentions this to emphasise – Philemon, you must forgive Onesimus to remain a fountain of joy to others.

Have you ever known someone who took everything personally, who remembered the details of a

thousand injuries done to them, who could spend hours of what could have been a perfectly joyful evening rehearsing the faults of others, and how they harmed this person. Now, in your dealings with such a person – would you describe them as joyful? Have they been the kind of magnetic personality that has invited others to fellowship with them?

Think of your own experience. Have bitterness and joy ever occurred at the same moment within? You must forgive for your joy's sake. The Spirit of God does not produce His fruit of joy and peace in the heart of one clinging to grudges, wounds and bitterness. Follow Paul's line of thinking and see how the joy of being filled with the Spirit is directly affected by forgiving or refusing to:

Ephesians 4:30-32 *And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. ³¹ Let all bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, and evil speaking be put away from you, with all malice. ³² And be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, just as God in Christ forgave you.*

Unforgiveness destroys your fellowship with God. It obstructs the flow of communication. It hinders your prayers. It destroys thanksgiving and praise. It poisons your speech with sarcasm, intolerance, impatience, criticism, suspicion. Live like this and you will over time, sabotage every one of your own relationships.

If the joy of the Lord is our strength, and bitterness destroys joy, then what will a lack of forgiveness do to our strength? It is not surprising to see bitter people as the ones who mentally and physically collapse under the strain of demanding repayment from all kinds of people.

III. You Must Forgive For Your Ministry's Sake

Philemon 1:4-6 *I thank my God, making mention of you always in my prayers, ⁵ hearing of your love and faith which you have toward the Lord Jesus and toward all the saints, ⁶ that the sharing of your faith may become effective by the acknowledgment of every good thing which is in you in Christ Jesus.*

As Paul describes Philemon, he describes a man with a very fruitful ministry. The souls of many believers have been refreshed in him. So much so that Paul prays that the sharing of Philemon's faith may continue to be effective.

Verse 6 is a bit of a mouthful. Paul probably means – as you continue to know Jesus Christ and acknowledge what it is to be in Him, may your ministry – the sharing of your faith continue to be effective.

Paul wants Philemon's effectiveness and usefulness to continue. He wants Philemon's power in ministry to be present. And what is one thing which will destroy your ministry's power? Bitterness. Unforgiveness. Paul appeals to Philemon to forgive Onesimus because if he doesn't, his usefulness will be greatly hindered, if not quenched altogether.

I heard of a pastor whose ministry was, on the surface, commendable. He was a good preacher; he was a family man; his church was well run and well-organised. There didn't seem to be any evidence of neglect. But his church never seemed to experience growth. An observer asked another pastor close to this man why he thought this was so, and the man said, “A root of bitterness is still in that man's life.”

A root of bitterness - why do you think the Bible uses that image in Hebrews 12:15? Like anyone who has done some weeding knows, if you want to be rid of a weed, you need to pull it up by the roots. To merely snap off what is on the surface won't help. In the same way, to merely regulate the outward expression of anger doesn't help. If there is a root of unforgiveness in the heart, it is going to keep producing the sins of hatred, malice, coldness, indifference, gossip, slander, unkindness, divisiveness, cynicism, suspiciousness.

A Christian who allows these things to lodge in his or her heart is going to be as useful as a blunt pair of scissors. You quench and grieve the Spirit, refuse His empowerment, pollute your heart, crowd out the fruit of the Spirit.

Just look at the example of King Saul. As he allowed bitterness in his life, it ruined him and destroyed his effectiveness. Whereas David prayed, enlarge my heart. Do you know what bitterness does? It shrinks your heart. It closes it up to others. It becomes a dark, suffocating place where nothing good can live.

Spurgeon said of someone, "May the grass grow green on his grave when he dies, for nothing ever grew around him while he lived."

I wonder how many Christians are one phone-call away from revival. I wonder how many Christians are one letter, one meeting over a cup of coffee away from revival – to give and receive it

Paul hasn't yet got to the basis of forgiveness and the actions of forgiveness. But in simply addressing Philemon, he has stated the need for it. He says, Philemon, you are a Christian. You are a joyful and joy-giving Christian. You are an effective minister. Don't allow this matter with Onesimus to destroy all that. Prove my words to be true. Forgive for your soul's sake, for your joy's sake, for your ministry's sake.

And this letter is addressed to you too. You profess to be saved. You wish to have joy and give it. You want to be useful in the Master's service. Then do not give Satan a place in your life. Perhaps you need to come at it the other way. If you are struggling with assurance; if the joy has all but dried up; if your usefulness to the Lord seems clipped and strained, check to see if you have failed to give, or ask for forgiveness.