

## **The Puzzle of Forgiveness**

Some things are a lot more fun to watch than to do. Some sports are great as spectator sports, but not so much as participants. I think forgiveness is one such activity. We love watching forgiveness. We love the stories of reconciliation. We may even shed a tear as we see the moment of reconciliation. We might shake our heads in disgust at the hard-hearted person who will not forgive. But it is very different to be in the arena, having to grant forgiveness and seek forgiveness. Suddenly, it is not fun at all, and we'd prefer to avoid it altogether. But if we claim to be in Christ, then forgiveness is not optional. We call our own salvation into doubt. We live under the self-imposed punishment of trying to be like God. We hinder our prayers and our worship. We destroy our own ministries.

Working through the book of Philemon helps us to understand why we need to forgive, because forgiven people forgive, and people who want to remain useful to Christ forgive. We've understood the actions of forgiveness – receiving a person as if he is someone else, and charging the offence to someone else.

But you have to admit that even when we have understood that, there is still much about forgiveness that is puzzling. What happens when the person who has offended us is not repentant? What happens when someone is offended at us, and we don't think he should be? What happens if we seek forgiveness and the other person won't grant it?

Forgiveness in real life is messy, complicated, and difficult. When you have to forgive at home, in the workplace, in the church, every situation is different. That's why we can be thankful that God gave us this real-life situation between Philemon and Onesimus so that we could understand forgiveness in living colour.

Philemon and Onesimus provide us with an example of how forgiveness and reconciliation should work. But thinking through their situation we can imagine what would have happened if it had not worked out that way. We can imagine at least two other scenarios where either Philemon or Onesimus did not repent, and what the responses would need to have been. By imagining these situations, we can put together the puzzle of forgiveness in our broken world, so that we can be pleasing to God and like Christ even when the other person does not obey.

### **Scenario 1: Onesimus Never Repents**

Let's imagine a situation when Onesimus runs away, taking money from Philemon, damaging his reputation, hurting him personally, and breaking the law. Let's imagine that either Onesimus never meets Paul in Rome and never gets saved. Or, we could imagine him getting saved and just begging Paul to keep him at his side, being too “shy” to ask for forgiveness, which would actually mean he was still too proud to ask for forgiveness.

We could also imagine Onesimus seemingly coming to Christ, but retaining a hard heart towards Philemon. Paul sends him back, but Onesimus is still defiant, angry. Philemon gives him his job back, but he is not repentant over what he did.

Either way, Philemon is not going to hear him ask for forgiveness, never going to have an opportunity for reconciliation and restoration. What should Philemon do?

First, of all, Philemon must practise internal forgiveness. What does that mean?

<sup>25</sup> *"And whenever you stand praying, if you have anything against anyone, forgive him, that your Father in heaven may also forgive you your trespasses."* <sup>26</sup> *"But if you do not forgive, neither will your Father in heaven forgive your trespasses."* (Mk. 11:25-26)

Notice, Jesus tells you to do this forgiveness when you stand praying. Now, if you are busy praying, who are you talking to at that moment? You are speaking to God. You are clearly not speaking to someone who has offended you, you are not in a conversation with someone who is giving you an apology. What this tells us is that the beginning of forgiveness is something you do before God. Whatever Onesimus chooses to do, Philemon, when praying must practise internal forgiveness, and charge Onesimus' debt to someone else. Philemon must surrender to God his right to demand payment. He must no longer seek to punish Onesimus in his heart, but trust in God's justice. So he can, now, between him and God, he can pray for Onesimus. *"pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you,"* <sup>45</sup> *"that you may be sons of your Father in heaven; (Matt. 5:44-45)*

Second, because he has forgiven Onesimus internally, he can show him kindness even while the relationship is estranged. This is what Paul means in Romans 12:20: <sup>20</sup> *Therefore "If your enemy is hungry, feed him; If he is thirsty, give him a drink; For in so doing you will heap coals of fire on his head."*

If we imagine Onesimus with his job back, but working with a surly and sulky attitude, Philemon shows him kindness by still housing and feeding him, and showing that he is hopeful for reconciliation. The relationship externally is still broken and strained, but once you have forgiven internally, you are able to show kindness when the opportunity presents itself.

Third, if Onesimus is back with Philemon, Philemon should make the effort to show him his sin. Jesus told us simply: <sup>3</sup> *"Take heed to yourselves. If your brother sins against you, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him. (Lk. 17:3)*

We often think it is the offender's responsibility to come and ask for forgiveness. But here we are told that the offended can initiate, and tell the person where he has gone wrong. Of course, the Bible describes how we should do these rebukes: with meekness, with gentleness, considering the beam in our own eye, before we do speck surgery on another. We think of the wisdom of how the prophet Nathan confronted David, how Abigail confronted David, and we see the wisdom of thinking "how would this rebuke sound, if I was on the receiving end of it"?

If Onesimus is not repentant, Philemon needs to forgive him internally, but then rebuke Onesimus so that there can be forgiveness externally. And until Onesimus repents, Philemon cannot extend that external forgiveness to him. Luke 17 makes it clear: "If your brother sins against you, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him. (Lk. 17:3) We do not go to an unrepentant person and say, "I just want to let you know, I've forgiven you." No, that would be mixing up internal and external forgiveness. Philemon has forgiven Onesimus internally in prayer. He prays for Onesimus, and he treats him with kindness. But for external forgiveness and reconciliation to take place, Onesimus must repent, and so Philemon must rebuke him, and tell him what he has done wrong.

What if Onesimus refuses to repent? It depends if he is a professing Christian or not. If he is not, or he no longer attends the church in Philemon's home, but is now attending Colossian Self-Esteem Ministries or Laodiceans Victory Chapel down the road, the most Philemon can do is pray for him, show him kindness while estranged, and communicate that he is ready to forgive him when he repents.

But if Onesimus is attending the church in Philemon's home, and he refuses to repent, then Matthew 18 tells you what happens next: <sup>15</sup> *"Moreover if your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he hears you, you have gained your brother. <sup>16</sup> "But if he will not hear, take with you one or two more, that by the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established." <sup>17</sup> "And if he refuses to hear them, tell it to the church. But if he refuses even to hear the church, let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector. (Matt. 18:15-17)*

If someone in your life does not or will not repent, or has perhaps died, so there is no longer a

chance for reconciliation: you make sure you have forgiven internally. If the person is alive, you show the kindness to an estranged enemy, and you help him see his fault so that reconciliation can take place. If he's a Christian in a sound church who won't reconcile, the church must discipline that person. If he's not a Christian or a Christian in a disobedient church, keep praying, and feeding your enemy while he's estranged.

But let's turn the tables and imagine a second imperfect scenario. Let's imagine this time

## **Scenario 2: Onesimus Repents, But Philemon Doesn't Forgive**

What would this look like. Well, first, Onesimus would have repented before God. He would have confessed his sin to God and sought forgiveness. Like David with Bathsheba, like Joseph when Potiphar's wife tempted him, recognise that sins against others is sin against God. If you are the offender, you begin by confessing sin to God, because if you can repent before God, you can repent before man.

Now, as Paul began prodding Onesimus to reconcile, we can imagine a lot of rationalisations going on, reasons why he should not have to actually go back to Philemon and reconcile. "It happened a long time ago". "Philemon lives really far away, and I am now living in Rome."

"It was such a small offence." "I'm just being too sensitive" "No one's perfect, we all make mistakes." "Making it right will involve money I don't have" "I'll determine not to do it again in the future".

But what would have been ringing in Onesimus' ears would have been the words from the sermon on the mount: <sup>23</sup> *"Therefore if you bring your gift to the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you,* <sup>24</sup> *leave your gift there before the altar, and go your way. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift. (Matt. 5:23-24)*

I can't keep serving God here with Paul, when I know I have not properly reconciled with Philemon. I know he has forgiven me before God, but I have not requested his forgiveness externally and made it right. The offence can be real or imagined. It doesn't say – if you have definitely sinned against your brother. It simply says – if your brother has something against you. They may have something against you because of something you overlooked, and need to find out. It may be something that is a misunderstanding, which needs to be cleared up. On the other hand, you might be very aware of how you have offended the other person, or sinned against God in your actions towards them.

So we imagine Onesimus making the long and difficult trip from Rome back to Colosse. A journey of 2000 kilometres, over sea and land. Reconciliation is often inconvenient, and uncomfortable.

But we picture Onesimus finally standing before Philemon, and Philemon reading Paul's letter. And let's imagine Philemon rolls up the scroll, and says to Onesimus, "I see Paul has some good news about you. What do you have to say. Onesimus?"

Onesimus now has the opportunity to gain this external forgiveness by confessing his wrong and asking for forgiveness. But Onesimus could really mess this up right now. He could say, "Look, I feel bad about what happened. I can understand why you would have been upset. We all make mistakes, and we need to forget about the past and move on. I feel I had good reasons for running away, but let's just leave that in the past. And If you were offended, then I'm sorry."

That's not a request for forgiveness. It's an expression of some regret, perhaps, but you can say those things and not be taking responsibility. In fact, that would be what I call a "I'm sorry it's your fault" apology. That's an underhanded way of putting the whole thing back in their lap. Well, if

you're so petty as to get offended, then I feel bad for you.

No, if Onesimus is truly repentant before God, he is going to be thinking about his sin from God's point of view, and that will help him see it from Philemon's point of view. So when he asks for forgiveness, he is going to ask in terms that Philemon would agree with. He is going to say it in a way that captures how Philemon sees what he did wrong. Philemon, I betrayed your trust, and abused your goodness. I stole your goods and deceived you all. I know I harmed you. God has had mercy on me and forgiven me. Will you please forgive me too?

Now let us assume that Onesimus has truly repented, and has asked for forgiveness in this biblical and sincere way. Let us imagine Philemon hardening his heart, and saying "You have a cheek coming back here with a letter from Paul, involving the church to protect you from your crime. Don't stand there and expect me to pretend none of this has ever happened. It's back to kitchen duties for you, and you're on vegetable rations till you can prove your loyalty."

Well, what would it mean if Philemon did this? Philemon would be in a dreadful place as a professed Christian. And now the tables would be turned, and it would be he that the church would now call upon to repent and reconcile. And if he would not, the church would need to discipline him.

But what should Onesimus do? Philemon would be out of fellowship with God, but that could not put Onesimus out of fellowship with God. Onesimus must continue to treat his enemy with kindness while estranged. He must continue to demonstrate fruits of repentance: that he has truly turned away from the sin that broke their relationship. He must not resent Philemon for not forgiving him, but forgive before God.

You see, this shows that whether you are the offender, or whether you are the offended, there is an internal forgiveness, which you are 100% responsible for, and an external forgiveness, which you are 50% responsible for. Internally, forgive the other person, charging it to God, or if you are the wrongdoer, confess it to God. And then whether you are the offender, or the offended, make your way to the other person. If you are the offended, your 50% is to show the other person his or her sin, and be willing to forgive. If you are the offender, your 50% is to claim ownership for your sin in terms the other person would agree with and ask for forgiveness.

If you do your 50%, and the other person is unwilling to repent, or unwilling to forgive, you continue to feed your enemy, and show you are willing to forgive, or that you are truly repentant. If the person is a believer, take it to church leadership.

But let's come back to what actually happened.

### **3) Onesimus Repents, and Philemon Forgives**

How do we know Onesimus was truly repentant? Because he made the trip back. Because Paul speaks of him as "my own heart" "my own son". Onesimus didn't cut any corners to achieve this reconciliation. He made an inconvenient, expensive, dangerous trip, facing all the danger and humiliation of owning his sin, and being willing to face consequences.

How do we know Philemon forgave? Well, Paul was certainly confident that he would.

<sup>20</sup> Yes, brother, let me have joy from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in the Lord. <sup>21</sup> Having confidence in your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say. <sup>22</sup> But, meanwhile, also prepare a guest room for me, for I trust that through your prayers I shall be granted to you.

Paul expects this refreshing ministry he referred to earlier to continue, and refresh Paul himself. He expected that Philemon would not only welcome and restore Onesimus, but treat with special kindness, and enjoy table fellowship with him in the church. In fact, he is so confident this will happen that Paul is not afraid to add a little extra accountability: I'm coming to visit soon, and I'm sure this will be sorted out when I get there.

How do we know that happened? Because Philemon made this private letter public. How many of you would take a private exhortation from your pastor and forward it to every Christian you know? Only if you had obeyed, and the obedience was now a matter of rejoicing for the whole church. Philemon could boast in Christ: look at what Jesus has set me free to do. Onesimus could boast, look what Jesus set me free to submit to.

And I think it is worth thinking about what Onesimus was submitting to, if he was truly repentant. First, he would need to confess his sin beyond Philemon. We confess private sins privately, but we confess public sins as widely as the sin is known. Onesimus' sin had gone public, and he needed to confess to others: Philemon's family, the other slaves in the household. He needed to stand in front of the church at Colossae, and testify of the grace of God in his life, admit his wrong and thank God for grace.

Second, he would need to have accepted consequences and corrective measures. Suppose Philemon had said, Onesimus, since your departure, I had to find someone to replace you. I now have a slave doing the tasks you were doing. I'm afraid you will have to start at the bottom again, cleaning the latrines, and keeping the midnight to early morning shifts.

If Onesimus had clenched his jaw, pursed his lips, and then exploded, "I travel thousands of miles on a dangerous journey, come and present myself before you, risking my own neck, when I could be out there as a free man, and you reward me with the dirtiest job in the house? Forget it. Tell Paul he's crazy if he thinks I'm going to work for someone like you." Would that be the heart of someone truly repentant?

No, it would be the heart of someone still quite proud. A repentant man would accept corrective measures. That is, he would accept such things as coming from the hand of God to help him learn humility, diligence and contentment. He would say with the Psalmist,

**Psalm 119:67** *Before I was afflicted I went astray, But now I keep Your word.*

**Psalm 119:71** *It is good for me that I have been afflicted, That I may learn Your statutes.*

Even when we are repentant, sin brings consequences. Repentance takes away the penalty of the sin, it does not necessarily take away all the results of the sin. Repentance accepts the consequences. It also accepts that God will kindly put some things in place to make it harder to go back to that sin.

If Philemon had said, brother Onesimus, it grieves me to do this, but the standard for my household has always been that runaway slaves who are recovered must have their ankles in iron tied to a chain for three months. Onesimus would have to say, that's fine. Thank you, Lord for making my obedience easier, and making it harder for me to sin.

Think about David. After Nathan the prophet confronts him about his sin with Bathsheba, he immediately confesses it. God forgives him on the spot. But Nathan says to him, still, as a result, the sword will never depart from your house, and the child of Bathsheba's will die. David accepted God's corrective measures. He prayed that God would change His course of action, but when He didn't, He accepted it.

The same was true when he ordered a sinful census of the people. God said to him, I offer you seven years of famine, three months of fleeing from your enemies or three days of plague. Once

again, there were consequences, and David accepted them.

The prodigal son in Jesus' parable accepts the corrective measures in advance. He says, "I know I can't be considered one of your sons. Make me a hired servant."

Truly repentant people accept corrective measures. A man repentant over his adultery accepts that he can no longer serve as a pastor or a deacon, and submit to extensive counselling with his pastor. A man repentant over his theft accepts the legal consequences of a court trial and the possible fines or sentences that will come of it. A woman repentant over her gossip accepts that she has estranged a lot of people, and it is going to take time to rebuild those friendships and re-establish trust. A person who has been church disciplined accepts the need to make restitution, to repair broken relationships and restore trust. The bottom line is, if you are repentant, then you are willing to face both the consequences of your sin, and whatever preventative measures are put in place to help you to not repeat the sin.

I think Onesimus was willing to face all of this. On the other hand, I think Philemon wanted to soften the blow. I believe he welcomed Onesimus back. I can imagine the story of the Christian Roman master who forgave and restored the Christian Roman slave began to spread through the empire, as the letter of Philemon was copied and re-copied and spread through the empire.

<sup>23</sup> *Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, greets you,* <sup>24</sup> *as do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, Luke, my fellow laborers.* <sup>25</sup> *The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Amen. (Phlm. 1:20-25)*

Sinners have an amazing capacity to rationalise away the need to forgive and be forgiven. We can make excuses that it is not up to us, or that it is mostly the other's fault, or that we need do nothing more. But in the end, it comes down to how much do we want to experience the presence of God through a tender conscience. If you do not wish to have coldness in your sensed walk with God, you cannot allow coldness in your relationships with others.

<sup>20</sup> If someone says, "I love God," and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, how can he love God whom he has not seen? (1 Jn. 4:20)

So here it is: have you done your 100% internal forgiveness, releasing another person, or confessing your sin to God? Second, have you done all of your 50%, going to that person, confessing it as sin and asking forgiveness, being willing to accept consequences and restitution, or helping that person by showing him his sin, and fully releasing him when he repents, helping restore the relationship.