

Philemon 16-25 — Restoration

January 23, 2018

Good morning. Last week we began our short series on the book of Philemon. This week, we finish the book. A study of this book is fast because it is only 25 verses. While it is a short book, it is a powerful book that is applicable for us today. It is a book about forgiveness. That is a topic that is relevant for all of us.

Before we get to our study, I want to take a few minutes to reorientate us to the background of the book. This letter was written by the apostle Paul to a wealthy Christian in the city of Colossae named Philemon. The book tells us Paul and Philemon were good friends. Philemon most likely met Paul when he was traveling through the port city of Ephesus on business. The book of Acts tells us Paul preached in the city of Ephesus for three years and many people became Christians in the city. It also tells us many travelers passing through the city heard the gospel, became Christians, then returned to their hometowns where they planted churches and told their communities the good news of what Jesus had done for them. Philemon was one of those Christians. He heard about Jesus from Paul in Ephesus then returned to his city of Colossae and helped begin a church in the city. The church even met in his home.

When Paul wrote the book of Philemon to his friend Philemon, it was years after they first met. At the time, Paul was at Rome in jail. While in Rome, Paul met a young man named Onesimus. We don't know how Paul and Onesimus' paths crossed. Maybe Onesimus spent some time in jail for a petty crime and he found himself in the same jail cell as Paul, which would make Onesimus Paul's captive audience.

Onesimus had a unique background. He was a runaway slave. As God would have it, he was a runaway slave from Philemon's home in Colossae, 1,800 miles away. While Onesimus had traveled 1,800 miles to lose himself in the city of Rome, God providentially ordered his life so he crossed paths with Paul, the same man that led his master to the Lord.

Over time, after hearing the gospel from Paul, like Philemon, Onesimus also gave his life to Christ and became a changed man. Onesimus even voluntarily stayed with Paul in prison to help him. Onesimus was the story of a changed life. The one outstanding issue that remained was his broken relationship with Philemon, his master. That was a wrong that would have been difficult to right.

Under Roman law, since Onesimus was a runaway slave, Philemon had the right to punish Onesimus severely. Philemon could even crucify him. If Onesimus wasn't crucified, he could be given the lesser penalty of being whipped and branded with a letter "F" on his head that would label him as a fugitive for the rest of his life.

For Onesimus to return to Philemon to try and make this relationship right involved risking his life. Roman law was exclusively on Philemon's side.

Thankfully a window of opportunity opened for Onesimus and Philemon to restore their relationship. Paul wrote a letter to the Colossian church meeting in Philemon's house, and he planned to have his close friend Tychicus hand-deliver the letter. That letter is the book of Colossians in our Bible. Paul encouraged Onesimus to join Tychicus on the trip and to try and restore the broken

relationship with Philemon, his master. To help bring the two of them together, Paul wrote a little note to be read to Philemon and the church that met in his home. It is the letter of Philemon in our Bible.

I picture Onesimus showing up with Tychicus in church, sweating bullets. He used Tychicus as a human shield in the crowd to keep distance between himself and Philemon until Tychicus finished reading this letter.

Last week, we studied the first 15 verses of the letter. To set the context for our study, let's read the letter of Philemon again.

Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, To Philemon our beloved fellow worker and Apphia our sister and Archippus our fellow soldier, and the church in your house: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. I thank my God always when I remember you in my prayers, because I hear of your love and of the faith that you have toward the Lord Jesus and for all the saints, and I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective for the full knowledge of every good thing that is in us for the sake of Christ. For I have derived much joy and comfort from your love, my brother, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you. Accordingly, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do what is required, yet for love's sake I prefer to appeal to you—I, Paul, an old man and now a prisoner also for Christ Jesus— I appeal to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I became in my imprisonment. (Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful to you and to me.) I am sending him back to you, sending my very heart. I would have been glad to keep him with me, in order that he might serve me on your behalf during my imprisonment for the gospel, but I preferred to do nothing without your consent in order that your goodness might not be by compulsion but of your own accord. For this perhaps is why he was parted from you for a while, that you might have him back forever, no longer as a bondservant but more than a bondservant, as a beloved brother—especially to me, but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord. So if you consider me your partner, receive him as you would receive me. If he has wronged you at all, or owes you anything, charge that to my account. I, Paul, write this with my own hand: I will repay it—to say nothing of your owing me even your own self. Yes, brother, I want some benefit from you in the Lord. Refresh my heart in Christ. Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say. At the same time, prepare a guest room for me, for I am hoping that through your prayers I will be graciously given to you. Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends greetings to you, and so do Mark,

Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke, my fellow workers. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Philemon (ESV)

Last week, in the first 15 verses, we learned a few lessons about forgiveness. Let me remind you about some of those.

1. **Forgiveness encourages the church.** Paul told Philemon that forgiveness is not just for two people, it is refreshing to the entire church. When there is a broken relationship between us and another believer, that broken relationship doesn't stay isolated between two people. It spreads to other people.

Philemon and Onesimus' broken relationship was in danger of hurting the entire church. The same is true for us at CrossWinds. Our broken relationships with a brother or sister in Christ at church affect the entire church, not just us. In the same way, forgiveness and restoration between people in the church is not just for their benefit but it becomes a powerful encouragement to the rest of the church. When we forgive someone in the church and restore a broken relationship it isn't just for our good, it is an encouragement to the entire church body.

2. **Forgiveness is essential for Christian growth.** Last week, when we examined Paul's prayer for Philemon we saw he prayed that Philemon would move from understanding things intellectually to understanding the faith experientially. He prayed Philemon would move from understanding forgiveness to going through the experience of extending forgiveness. Talking about forgiveness is easy. Needing to extend forgiveness is hard, but it is also good. When we go through the experience of extending forgiveness we understand forgiveness in a different way. As I said last week, it is the

difference between talking about climbing Mt. Everest and actually climbing Mt. Everest. For God to mature our faith and grow us in our understanding and love of forgiveness, sometimes God will allow us to experience deep hurt from other people, even Christian people. He allows this not because he hates us but because he loves us and is using that as a way to grow our faith. The only way to grow our understanding and love of forgiveness is we need to go through the hard experience of needing to forgive others like Christ has forgiven us.

- 3. Forgiveness cannot be demanded.** True forgiveness must come from the heart. In the letter of Philemon, Paul never commanded Philemon to forgive Onesimus. He appealed to him, requesting him to do what is right. This is important. Last week, we looked at the example of growing up and fighting with our brothers and sisters. Whenever Mom caught us, she commanded us to forgive each other. Many of us said we forgave our brother or sister to please our mother, but in our hearts we hadn't forgiven anyone. We were still filled with anger and bitterness. In our relationships with people, especially Christian brothers and sisters, it is tempting to command them to do what we know is right. The problem is forgiveness cannot be forced on someone. Forgiveness must come willingly from someone's heart. It is something we can only encourage. In this letter, notice how Paul commended Philemon for his great character, then Paul said, "Philemon, I appeal to you to keep acting that way. Forgive Onesimus from your heart." When it comes to forgiveness,

we can only appeal for it so it comes from a genuinely forgiving heart.

Demanded forgiveness that doesn't come from the heart never works.

4. **Repentance encourages forgiveness.** One of the fastest ways to mend a relationship is to be repentant of our sin or of anything we have done to hurt someone either intentionally or unintentionally. In any broken relationship, take the initiative and repent of anything we may have done or said that may stand in the way of restoration. In the story of Philemon and Onesimus, Onesimus took the initiative to repent of his sin. He traveled with Tychicus to confess his sin to Philemon and ask forgiveness, even at the risk of his own life. Repentance, even when it is risky or costly, is always the fastest way to forgiveness and restoration.

These are some of the important lessons we learned last week about forgiveness.

As we pick up our study, we are in verse 17 where we learn more about Christian forgiveness.

Forgiveness includes abundant kindness.

**So if you consider me your partner, receive him as you would receive me.
Philemon 17 (ESV)**

This is the high point of the book. Paul finally made clear what he wanted Philemon to do for Onesimus. He wanted Philemon to forgive Onesimus plus shower abundant kindness. As Paul said, "Receive him like you would receive me."

Usually, when we forgive people, we part ways and avoid one another from that point forward. While we don't intentionally dwell on the bad memories of

our formerly broken relationship, the problem is we don't have anything to replace those memories. The hurt is the only reference point we have every time we think about that person.

Paul had a different strategy. He told Philemon to receive Onesimus like he would receive Paul. In other words, "Don't just completely forgive Onesimus — like Jesus completely forgave you — but show abundant kindness to Onesimus when you forgive him. Treat him with as much kindness and love as you would treat me. In so doing that will replace the bad memories you have together with good memories."

Put yourself in Onesimus' shoes. If Philemon said he forgave him but then Philemon avoided him, how helpful would that have been for the church? On the other hand, if Philemon said he forgave Onesimus then he hugged him and had him over to his home for dinner, that would have changed things. Not only would Onesimus see evidence that he was genuinely forgiven but the entire church would have been thrilled because they could have seen evidence that Philemon and Onesimus had a restored relationship.

This verse also has some details about the depth of love and care Paul wanted Philemon to show to Onesimus. In the beginning of the verse Paul said, "If you consider me your partner..." Partner may not be the best translation of this Greek word. Partner sounds distant. The word in Greek means someone with whom you have a deep connection. It means a close friendship. It means a heart-level bond between people. Paul said, "If you consider me your close friend and blood-brother, receive Onesimus with the some kind of deep love and

kindness you would show to me.” Paul wanted Philemon’s forgiveness of Onesimus to be coupled with over-the-top kindness and love.

It is easy for us to miss the breathtaking nature of Paul’s request. We forget Philemon was a wealthy master. Onesimus was a poor runaway slave that was a fugitive from justice who was trying to make things right. We forget Philemon was expected to whip and brand Onesimus. Instead of a whipping, Philemon was asked to forgive Onesimus, who was his brother in the Lord. He was to forgive him fully and completely plus extend over-the-top kindness to him.

Why was Paul asking for a grandiose display of kindness to this runaway slave who repented of his sin? The answer is the gospel. Our forgiveness of others, especially of Christian brothers and sisters, should mirror the kind of forgiveness shown to us by Jesus our savior. We were God’s enemies because of our sin. Jesus became one of us to die for us and forgive us. We are not just forgiven by God but with our forgiveness we were shown over-the-top kindness.

The Bible describes us not just as completely forgiven of our sin but as the most blessed beings in the entire universe.

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, Ephesians 1:3 (ESV)

He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? Romans 8:32 (ESV)

My friends, not just forgiving people but blessing those we forgive with amazing kindness is the gospel. In our forgiveness of others, we are to mirror the kind of forgiveness shown to us by our heavenly father. This is why Christian forgiveness is not just completing forgiveness but also involves extending abundant and undeserved blessing.

What is the result when Christians don't just forgive and go their separate ways? Bad memories are replaced with good memories. The entire church is encouraged as they watch a broken relationship restored and improved. The gospel is even preached to the watching world as people see a kind of forgiveness and relational restoration they have not seen anywhere else in the world.

Forgiveness means restoring what was lost.

If he has wronged you at all, or owes you anything, charge that to my account. I, Paul, write this with my own hand: I will repay it—to say nothing of your owing me even your own self. Philemon 18–19 (ESV)

Some people read the “if” in the beginning of this sentence and think there was a possibility Onesimus did not steal from Philemon. That is not the purpose of the “if.” The purpose of the “if” is not to make us wonder if Onesimus stole, it is so Paul can address whatever Onesimus stole. Another word we could use is the word “whatever.”

What did Onesimus steal? Onesimus probably stole money from Philemon to finance his trip to Rome. In addition, as we learned when we studied slavery in the book of Colossians, slavery was a way to pay off debt in the ancient world. If you took a loan and faulted on the loan, the terms of your agreement involved becoming a slave to the lender for an agreed upon period of time as part of repaying the loan. Onesimus might have been a slave of Philemon's because he borrowed money from Philemon then defaulted on the loan. If that was the case, Philemon also lost the money Onesimus didn't repay.

The one thing Onesimus stole for sure was the work he no longer provided once he skipped town. Philemon needed to purchase another slave to replace Onesimus.

It is probable that Onesimus was deeply in debt to Philemon, his master, from possibly steal from him, probably defaulting on a loan from him and then putting his master in the position of needing to buy another slave. One thing is clear: Onesimus owed Philemon a lot of money. It seems had a debt he couldn't pay.

If there was going to be true restoration of relationship between Philemon and Onesimus, there needed to be restitution of whatever was stolen or lost. If you steal a bicycle from your friend's garage, part of restoring that relationship involves replacing the bicycle. If you throw a baseball and it goes through your neighbor's window, part of restoring that relationship involves buying a new window. If there was going to be reconciliation between Philemon and Onesimus, there must be restitution of what Onesimus had taken.

The problem with Onesimus and people in his shoes is even if they repent of their sin, they have no ability to pay for their sin. This is where we see the gospel impacting forgiveness.

Paul stepped to the plate and offered to pay the debt Onesimus could not pay. Paul said, "Whatever Onesimus owes you, charge that to my account. I will pay." Paul paid the debt Onesimus couldn't pay so Onesimus could go free. Do you see the gospel in this? We owed God the Father a debt we couldn't pay because of our sin. The price of reconciling the relationship with God our Father

was too high for us to pay. Jesus stepped to the plate and paid the debt we couldn't pay.

In fact, the last words Jesus spoke when he died on the Roman cross were *tetelestai*. They mean, "It is finished." They were the same words stamped across an ancient loan note. They mean, "Paid in full." When Jesus died on the cross, he took the debt of our sin that we couldn't pay and he paid for our sins. Then he literally stamped across it, "Paid in full," so our relationship with God the father could be restored.

...by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross. Colossians 2:14 (ESV)

Paul did for Onesimus that same thing Jesus did for us. He paid the debt Onesimus couldn't pay to restore the relationship Onesimus couldn't restore. This is one of the ways Christian forgiveness is different. Like Paul, when we see a brother or sister in Christ trying to restore a broken relationship and it is beyond his or her ability to pay, the people of Christ step forward and offer to pay the debt. Why do we do this? This is what Jesus did for us. We delight in preaching the gospel by mirroring what Jesus did for us.

Never are we more like God than when we forgive. Never are we more like Christ than when we offer to pay someone else's debt he or she cannot pay. Paul's willingness to suffer the temporal consequences of Onesimus' sins mirrors Christ's willingness to suffer the eternal consequences of our sin.

Forgiveness refreshes the church.

Yes, brother, I want some benefit from you in the Lord. Refresh my heart in Christ. Philemon 20 (ESV)

At the beginning of this book, Paul complimented Philemon for his gracious character and how his love and good deeds refreshed the entire church.

For I have derived much joy and comfort from your love, my brother, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you. Philemon 7 (ESV)

Now Paul gets specific. While Philemon's love for other people in the church benefited the entire church, Paul wanted Philemon to benefit his heart by forgiving and restoring Onesimus, the man Paul had grown to love.

Here is the point: Paul said nothing would make him happier than seeing Philemon and Onesimus with a restored relationship, with love and forgiveness flowing between them.

Paul's point was one of the most refreshing things we can experience is Christian forgiveness that is complete and full, a forgiveness that goes from avoiding one another to blessing one another. Just as forgiveness from God through Jesus is the most refreshing experience of the soul, forgiveness and restoration between people is one of the most refreshing experiences we can have in this life, especially when the forgiveness mirrors gospel-type forgiveness.

While it was Paul's plea for Philemon to bless Onesimus and the entire church by forgiving and restoring him, it is also God's plea to us. For both weeks of this series, as we studied forgiveness, I suspect there is a broken relationship that God keeps bringing to mind. There is a name you are trying to avoid. Today, you need to decide if you will refresh ourselves and our church by making the call. Will you schedule a meeting where you can either repent of your sin or offer forgiveness or try and repair a broken relationship? In so doing, you will make Christ's name famous as you put gospel forgiveness into practice in real life.

When mature Christians forgive, they do not look for a loophole to avoid making things right.

Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say. Philemon 21 (ESV)

As Paul prepared to close the letter, he reaffirmed his confidence that Philemon would forgive completely and fully. He was also confident Philemon would do even more than he requested. Paul said, “If there is anything I missed when it comes to forgiving Onesimus I know you will take care of doing whatever needs to take place to make things right.”

Paul was confident Philemon would act like a mature Christian and not look for loopholes to avoid doing what was right. The same is true for us. A few moments ago, when I asked you about the name of someone who God is calling you to restore a broken relationship with, I am sure with that name came a list of excuses. Maybe you don't know his or her number. Maybe you think he or she is beyond hope. Maybe it is just too painful to make the call. Mature Christians do not look for a loophole to get out of forgiving and restoring.

Gentle accountability helps with forgiveness.

At the same time, prepare a guest room for me, for I am hoping that through your prayers I will be graciously given to you. Philemon 22 (ESV)

Paul's plans were to visit Philemon to see how things turned out. This was not harsh accountability but gentle accountability. Paul was confident Philemon would forgive but Paul wanted to see how things turned out. He wanted to hear the story of how forgiveness and reconciliation took place. Today, with the name the Holy Spirit brings to mind, find a friend you trust and love. Ask him or her to gently hold you accountable to make you make the effort to forgive and restore.

Conclusion

Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends greetings to you, and so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke, my fellow workers. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Philemon 23–25 (ESV)

As Paul signed off this letter, he mentioned the men who were with him in prison at Rome. I want to highlight one crucial name. That name is Mark. He is worth mentioning because in the book of Acts, when Paul and Barnabas went on their first missionary journey, Mark — also known as John-Mark — went with them. When things became rough, Mark turned back and went home. When Paul and Barnabas prepared for their second missionary journey, Barnabas wanted to take Mark with them, but Paul refused to let him go. There was a seriously broken relationship between Paul and Mark. This led to Paul and Barnabas splitting and heading separate ways.

This broken relationship between Mark and Paul even led to some of the early churches not accepting Mark when he came to visit. The relational rift between Paul and Mark didn't stay between Paul and Mark, it spread in the church.

Two weeks ago, when we finished Colossians, we saw evidence of this rift affecting churches.

Aristarchus my fellow prisoner greets you, and Mark the cousin of Barnabas (concerning whom you have received instructions—if he comes to you, welcome him)... Colossians 4:10 (ESV)

I also want you to notice that by the time Paul wrote Colossians, the broken relationship between Mark and Paul was restored. Mark was now with Paul as one of his helpers in Rome. The restored relationship that Paul had with Mark came about because of gospel forgiveness. It is what Paul prayed would

happen between Philemon and Onesimus. As Paul wrote this letter to Philemon and Onesimus about going through the hard work of forgiveness, it is something Paul understood firsthand with Mark.

Last week, I tantalized you with questions of what happened after this letter. Did Philemon forgive Onesimus? What happened to Onesimus in the years that followed?

In this letter, Paul was confident of Philemon's character. He was confident Philemon would completely forgive Onesimus and overwhelm him with kindness. The survival of this letter, its love by the early church, and its inclusion in our Bible are evidence that Philemon heeded Paul's appeal.

Many people believe that since it was Paul's desire to have Onesimus with him Rome — since he implied this in v. 13, 14 and 20 — Philemon likely returned Onesimus to Paul in Rome. Onesimus became one of a handful of men that spent constant time with Paul. Many of these men became the next generation of leaders in the church.

While we can't be sure, there is strong historical evidence for what happened to Onesimus. Fifty years later, when Ignatius, an ancient church leader, was writing from the city of Smyrna on his way to martyrdom in Rome, he wrote letters to important churches in the ancient world. One of the letters he wrote was to the church in Ephesus.¹ In our study of the book of Ephesians, we learned the city of Ephesus was the third largest city in the Roman Empire. The church was huge. It was one of the largest churches in the ancient world. In

¹ Ignatius, Letter to the Ephesians 1:3, 6:2.

Ignatius' letter he talked about the amazing pastor of the megachurch of Ephesus as a man he loved, a man named Onesimus.

Is this the same Onesimus? It probably is. Even though it is 50 years after Paul wrote the letter of Philemon, so Onesimus would have been an old man, there is an important clue. In the letter of Philemon verse 11, Paul used a pun on Onesimus' name. Onesimus in Greek means useful. Paul said in Philemon 11 that "the one who was useless has now become useful to you and to me." Ignatius used this exact same pun to talk about the pastor of the church of Ephesus, "Onesimus, the man who was useless has become useful."

What this reminds us is we can never underestimate the power of extending God's forgiveness and grace. When Philemon didn't crucify, whip or brand Onesimus but instead mirrored the forgiveness he experienced from God so he completely forgave him and lavishly loved on Onesimus, that grace was the pivot point in Onesimus' life. It was that complete forgiveness with abundant kindness that God used to make Onesimus one of the best pastors in the ancient world in one of the largest churches of the ancient world.

Friends, remember that name God brought to mind? I know extending forgiveness and kindness to him or her like Christ did to you doesn't feel like it is worth the risk or the work. Learn from Onesimus. We can never underestimate what God does when we mirror the forgiveness and kindness we have received from Christ to others.



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