

11-29-2020 Sunday Morning Sermon - Philemon 1-25

## A Living Lesson in Forgiveness

As we turn to the Scriptures today, I'd like to look at one of the characteristics of believers that we must work on consistently, because it affects us tremendously, and also affects our fellowship with God. This is the attitude and action of forgiveness. And we see a living example of this in the book of Philemon. Pause....You know that the Bible teaches that God is a forgiving God. This theme is picked up again and again in all of Scripture. It starts in the garden when Adam and Eve sin, and God does not immediately bring physical death to them, but graciously provides them with clothing and provision.

All through the old testament, God deals graciously with the nation of Israel, not immediately punishing their sinfulness and rebellion.

After He brought them out from Egypt from the oppression of Pharoah, and while He was giving

Moses instruction for them to provide blessing and protection for them, they fell into grievous sin.

In Exodus 34:6-7 After the people had sinned against God and made the Golden calf, Moses goes back to have the tablets made a second time. It is there that God describes Himself to Moses saying, **“The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, 7keeping steadfast love for thousands,<sup>a</sup> forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin”**.

This is a pattern that continues throughout the life of Moses and Joshua, and into the book of Judges. And when King David falls into terrible sin with Bathsheba and has Uriah killed, God spares him.

Later, after repenting, in Psalm 32:1, David says **“Blessed is the one whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered.”** Forgiven and covered by whom? By God.

Psalm 130:3-4 **“3If you, O Lord, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand?**

**4But with you there is forgiveness, that you may be feared.”**

Over in the new testament we read:

Ephesians 1:7-8 says **“In Him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace, which he lavished upon us...”**

Colossians 1:14 describes the Son as the one **“in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.”**

And 1 John 1:9 we know well. **“If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us of all unrighteousness.”**

So forgiveness is something that God is known for and it has been central to who He is from the beginning. It was part of His plan because He knew it would be required in order to save His people from their sins.

Listen to the following verses describing the eternal electing purposes of God.

**Matt 25:34 “Then the King will say to those on His right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.’”**

**Acts 2:23 “He was delivered up by God's set plan and foreknowledge, and you, by the hands of the lawless, put Him to death by nailing Him to the cross.”**

**I Pet 1:20 “He was foreknown before the foundation of the world but was made manifest in the last times for the sake of you”**

So the mercy of God in forgiveness through the sending of His son was planned in eternity past, is made plain Scripture, and extends to us today.

Perhaps nowhere in the Bible is the forgiveness of God more clearly displayed than in the story of the Prodigal Son in Luke 15. You know the story, a man had two sons, and the younger son asked for his portion of the inheritance and left home. After living a depraved life, he runs out of money and ends up feeding pigs and wishing he could eat what

they were eating. He comes to his senses and exclaims, “**how many of my father’s servants have more than enough bread, and I’m starving!**” He decides to return, but doesn’t expect much, only that hopefully he will be allowed to be a servant in the household, tolerated at best. But we read these wonderful words starting in verse 20 **“20And he arose and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. 21And the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’<sup>c</sup> 22But the father said to his servants,<sup>d</sup> ‘Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet. 23And bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate. 24For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.’ And they began to celebrate.”**

The father in the story is God, and he is gracious and loving and forgiving. Forgiveness is central to who God is. And when we forgive others, we are like Him. And this is something that is foreign to us

naturally, so it also serves to assure us that He is living in us when we can really forgive others, since we know that kind of attitude and action has to come from somewhere outside of our natural desires. We are truly like God when we forgive.

That brings us back to the book of Philemon.

So take your Bibles, and turn there now. Philemon is tucked between the books of Titus and Hebrews in the New Testament. It is on page 1000 in the pew Bible. Philemon is a small book, only 1 chapter, 25 verses. Though it is not the smallest book in the New Testament, it is the smallest book that Paul wrote, and it is different from many of his epistles. This book is a personal letter. I want us to read it together, then I'll give some background and walk through what I believe are some important principles that we learn about forgiveness from this small but powerful letter. There is a lot going on and I want us to look together at some background and then how Paul approaches the very real and shocking request that he is making of Philemon. Although you never see the word 'Forgive' or

'Forgiveness' in this letter, the inference is very clear. We will see Paul:

1. Express his love and appreciation for Philemon. V (4-7)
2. Request forgiveness and reconciliation from Philemon to Onesimus. V(8-16)
3. Remind Philemon of the basis for these actions. V(17-21)
4. Let Philemon know that Paul will be coming soon to make sure Philemon has followed through. V 22 And finally,
5. Show Philemon that Paul has done this very thing himself. V 24

Starting in verse 1..

**1Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother,**

**To Philemon our beloved fellow worker 2and Apphia our sister and Archippus our fellow soldier, and the church in your house:**

**3Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.**

**4I thank my God always when I remember you in my prayers, 5because I hear of your love and of the faith that you have toward the Lord Jesus and for all the saints, 6and 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.<sup>a</sup> 7For I have derived much joy and comfort from your love, my brother, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you.**

**8Accordingly, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do what is required, 9yet for love's sake I prefer to appeal to you—I, Paul, an old man and now a prisoner also for Christ Jesus—10I appeal to you for my child, Onesimus,<sup>b</sup> whose father I became in my imprisonment.**

Let's stop there. First a personal note, then some history.

This year, our family has been part of one of the study groups looking at the book of Colossians. I've

enjoyed learning about how that church was planted and the how God used the Apostle Paul in doing so. The book of Colossians and the book of Philemon are very closely tied together for various reasons. One, they were, along with Ephesians and Philippians, written while Paul was under house arrest in Rome. And second, the church in Colossae was meeting in the house of Philemon. Philemon and Epaphras had been led to faith in Christ by Paul several years earlier, probably during his ministry in Ephesus. In Acts 19:9-10 we read of Paul **“reasoning daily in the hall of Tyrannus. This continued for two years, so that all the residents of Asia (Turkey) heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks.”** This was likely the time that Epaphras and Philemon traveled to Ephesus and were converted. At which time, they returned east 100 miles to Colossae and started the church there. This church was meeting in Philemon’s house, so this meant he was a man of some wealth, and we also learn that he owned slaves, one of whom was Onesimus. Now by all accounts, Philemon was a kind and generous man, ‘a fellow worker’ as Paul puts it in verse 1, but Onesimus ran away from him,

possibly taking something from him, and fled all the way to Rome. Rome was approximately 1000 miles away from Colossae, and Onesimus was likely seeking to get lost in the mass of humanity that was the Roman underground of the day. We don't know how exactly, but God in His sovereignty arranged the meeting of Paul and Onesimus. He may have heard of Paul before from Philemon, or even met him before in Ephesus, we don't know. He could have run into Epaphras, who was also there in Rome at the time speaking to Paul about the church in Colossae – we don't know how it was arranged, but he did meet Paul, and through God's grace and Paul's preaching, he became a believer. He became a faithful brother to Paul, and was very useful to him. But there was a matter that had to be taken care of. He had run away from his master, and although Paul would like for him to stay, he knew that he had to send him back to Philemon. At the very least, Onesimus had deprived Philemon of his services, and may have stolen from him as well. Paul knew that the two of them needed to be restored, so he returned Onesimus to Philemon. But he didn't return him alone...he sent him with

Tychicus who had a letter for the Colossian church, and also now a letter to Philemon, which was also meant to be read to not only Philemon, but to everyone in the Colossian church as well. That is at the end of verse 2. There is an almost word match between the greetings in the two books. The first 4 verses of Colossians says “**1Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother,**

**2To the saints and faithful brothers<sup>a</sup> in Christ at Colossae: Grace to you and peace from God our Father. 3We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, 4since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints.”** The beginning of Philemon is almost the same “**1Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, To Philemon our beloved fellow worker 2and Apphia our sister and Archippus our fellow soldier, and the church in your house: 3Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. 4I thank my God always when I remember you in my prayers, 5because I hear of your love and of the**

**faith that you have toward the Lord Jesus and for all the saints.”** One main difference is obviously the main recipient, and also Apphia, and Archippus, who we believe are Philemon’s wife and son. Archippus is also mentioned in the letter to the Colossians in 4:17, and was in the ministry in some form. Paul charges him there **“See that you fulfill the ministry that you have received in the Lord.”** So Paul begins with his love and appreciation for Philemon, and then starting in verse 6, Paul expresses his real heart’s desire, the outcome that he is praying for, when he writes “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.” The word sharing used here is the Greek word ‘Koinonia’, usually translated ‘fellowship’. But it means much more than enjoying each other’s company. It refers to a mutual sharing of all life, and could also be translated ‘belonging’ which describes how believers all belong to each other in a mutual partnership produced by their faith in Christ. Get this – by forgiving Onesimus, which Paul will shortly be asking Philemon to do, Onesimus will not only belong to Philemon, but

Philemon will belong to Onesimus – in Christ! Such an act of forgiveness on the part of Philemon would be ‘effective’ or ‘powerful’ in the original language. And “effective for the full knowledge of every good thing that is in us.” What does this mean? Well, 2 Pet 1:3 tells us that **“His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence.”** A goal of the Christian life is to live in a way that reflect’s God’s glorious attributes and His excellent character. One of these attributes is forgiveness. So this forgiveness lives in Philemon, and he has probably read about it and heard about it, but now it is time for him to live it, or experience it. It goes like this. Onesimus has wronged him, but is now a brother in Christ, and asking for forgiveness. Philemon has the opportunity to show his mutual brotherhood with Onesimus and experience the fullness of one of the glorious attributes of the Lord, namely forgiveness.

Back in 2001, before Stephanie and I had the (burden) blessing of children, we had the opportunity to take a few trips. One of these trips

was to Fresno Calif. Now, I know that Fresno doesn't sound all that exciting, but we only went there so that we could rent a car and drive to the Mariposa Grove of the Sequoia National Forest. We camped there and walked around the forest for a day or two and let me tell you, it was amazing. This is the southern of the two redwood forests, not the one with the tallest trees – those are in the Northern part of CA. Those trees reach over 350 ft. tall. The ones we saw, however, were bigger around and were magnificent. I had heard of them, and seen pictures of them, even the one where you can drive a car through the tree, but had never seen them in person. It was different. It is hard to describe to someone who hasn't been there – these trees are as wide across as this church. It is almost unbelievable. The point is, when you experience something first hand it is different than someone telling you about it, or even seeing a picture of it. Imagine skydiving. Now do it. See the difference? So Paul is saying to Philemon, he is praying that this godly attribute will be effective for the fellowship there at Colossae, having seen forgiveness first hand. And why do all of this? For Christ's sake, or

literally, 'unto Christ'. This is an offering of worship unto our Savior.

### Application for us from these verses:

1. We should thank God and Pray for the love and faith of other believers.
2. We should strive to be refreshers – we will be refreshed by others, this goes without saying, but we should be the kinds of people that are encouraging to the body, as we can.

Now in verses 8-16, Paul is going to explain what he is asking of Philemon, which is to forgive and restore Onesimus, in so many words.

**8Accordingly, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do what is required, 9yet for love's sake I prefer to appeal to you—I, Paul, an old man and now a prisoner also for Christ Jesus—10I appeal to you for my child, Onesimus,<sup>b</sup> whose father I became in my imprisonment.**

**11(Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful to you and to me.) 12I am sending him back to you, sending my very heart. 13I 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, 14but I preferred to do nothing without your consent in order that your goodness might not be by compulsion but of your own accord. 15For this perhaps is why he was parted from you for a while, that you might have him back forever, 16no longer as a bondservant<sup>c</sup> 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 here we see Paul begin his plea for Onesimus. There is nothing particularly doctrinal in all of this book, and we don't see Paul basing his request on any theological foundation that he has articulated or will articulate. But that doesn't mean that the principles didn't exist. He assumes that Philemon has read the Scriptures, that he is a believer, that he knows what it is to be forgiven, and that it is important to forgive. What would he have known? Well he likely would have heard about the Sermon on the Mount, where Jesus said the following words in Matthew 6:14-15, part of the disciples prayer

taught to them by Jesus **“If you forgive men for their transgressions, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions.”**

He knew that failing to forgive others hinders one’s fellowship with God and puts us in the dangerous position of God’s chastening. He also would have heard of the parable that we read about in

Matthew 18. Starting in verse 21, Peter asks Jesus how often he must forgive his brother who has sinned against him. Peter thinks he is being magnanimous by saying 7 times, but Jesus ups the stakes considerably, and then tells him a parable to explain. **“21Then Peter came up and said to him,**

**“Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?”**

**22Jesus said to him, “I do not say to you seven times, but seventy-seven times. (What!?!)**

**23“Therefore the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants.<sup>g</sup> 24When he began to settle, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents. (unpayable debt)<sup>h</sup> 25And since he could**

not pay, his master ordered him to be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and payment to be made. 26So the servant<sup>i</sup> fell on his knees, imploring him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.' 27And out of pity for him, the master of that servant released him and forgave him the debt. 28But when that same servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii,<sup>j</sup> and seizing him, he began to choke him, saying, 'Pay what you owe.' 29So his fellow servant fell down and pleaded with him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.' 30He refused and went and put him in prison until he should pay the debt. 31When his fellow servants saw what had taken place, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their master all that had taken place. 32Then his master summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. 33And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?' 34And in anger his master delivered him to the jailers,<sup>k</sup> until he should pay all his debt. 35So also my heavenly Father will do to

**every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart.”**

Apart from the obvious wickedness that this parable conveys to us on the part of the servant, and the need to forgive others in the way that we have been forgiven, we see something else that Philemon would have known. Look again at verse 31.

**“31When his fellow servants saw what had taken place, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their master all that had taken place.”** Unforgiveness can greatly hinder fellowship with other believers. We all know how much we have been forgiven. And to see a fellow believer withholding forgiveness from someone because of pride or another wrong motive distresses us, because it does not jibe with the new nature that has been placed within us, nor the Holy Spirit that now lives within us. So Philemon knew what he must do, but that didn't make it easy. Surely it was difficult for him to control his emotion with Onesimus right there before him, and it would be difficult to forgive him. That's why Paul reasoned with Philemon and used godly persuasion with him,

to help him with this difficult task. He did this by reminding Philemon that Paul himself was a prisoner, that he was old, that he loved Onesimus himself, and that Onesimus was now a brother in Christ. He also used an interesting play on words in verse 11. When I first heard about this, over 20 years ago, I thought, wow, that is so neat. The name Onesimus was a common name for slaves, and it means, literally, 'Useful'. So Paul is saying that 'Useful' became 'Useless', but is now 'Useful' again. Very cool. And then Paul says that he is sending him back and calls him 'my very heart'. This is another way of making it easier on Philemon – someone who meant so much to Paul would surely deserve to receive mercy. Paul tells Philemon that he could have commanded him to show mercy, but he wanted this to be of Philemon's 'own accord' or free will. For any of you who have been searching for free will in the Bible, we've found it! Paul speaks of doing things not out of compulsion here and other places, like in 2 Cor 9:6-7 where he speaks of the offering to the saints in Jerusalem. He tells the Corinthians "**6The point is this: whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and**

**whoever sows bountifully<sup>d</sup> will also reap bountifully. 7Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.”** He also says that he would have liked to keep Onesimus with him, but wanted to do the right thing. And now he is asking Philemon to do the right thing, namely to forgive and restore Onesimus. One bonus of this is that now his slave will also be a brother in Christ, and useful for service in that capacity as well.

### Application for us from these verses:

1. “Friendly persuasion” can be biblical. That principle is taught in Paul’s letter to Philemon. Some kinds of “friendly persuasion” are not biblical, such as blackmail, white lies, or insincere flattery. Unethical arm-twisting and unscrupulous manipulation are certainly not biblical kinds of “friendly” persuasion! However, there is a biblical kind of friendly persuasion, and the apostle Paul used it here. He did this by appealing to 4 things:

- a. Philemon's love v. 9,14
- b. The change in Onesimus v. 10,16
- c. The sovereignty of God v. 15-16
- d. Paul's friendship

We don't always use authority to help our brothers and sisters, but rather loving encouragement, since we ourselves will need that same encouragement just around the corner.

Now that Paul has made his plea for Onesimus, he wants to remind Philemon of the proper motivation behind the forgiveness being requested. We pick it up in verse 17.

**17So if you consider me your partner, receive him as you would receive me. 18If he has wronged you at all, or owes you anything, charge that to my account. 19I, Paul, write this with my own hand: I will repay it—to say nothing of your owing me even your own self. 20Yes, brother, I want some benefit from you in the Lord. Refresh my heart in Christ.**

Paul appeals to his partnership with Philemon in verse 17, and asks Philemon to receive back Onesimus, the runaway criminal as he would receive the apostle Paul. If Paul were coming to Philemon's house, you can bet that he would be more than welcoming – and Paul is asking him to do the same for his runaway slave. This harkens back to the story of the Prodigal Son – a reception that is underserved and still given – a picture of Grace. And notice what Paul is doing here. He is holding himself forth as the payment for another man's sin. This is Paul standing in the place of a man who has sinned. The picture is one that Philemon would know. A sinner stands before a judge and a payment is required, yet the sinner has nothing with which to pay. So a substitute who has the ability to pay the debt steps forward and takes the place of the sinner. This is the gospel. Paul is being Christlike in a very real sense here. Then, he reminds Philemon that Philemon owes Paul a greater debt than Onesimus owes to him – namely eternal life through the sharing of the gospel with him years earlier. And this is the motivation for doing what needs to be done. Paul says, if we are

partners, and you have any affection for me, and if you remember the grace you have been extended, and if you remember that you also owe your spiritual and eternal well being to someone else, then that should be reason enough for you to show mercy and love to a brother who has wronged you. In spite of how hard it might seem – not to minimize your hurt, but if you think you have been wronged, think of our Lord, and how far he condescended, how much he suffered, how meek and patient He was, even to the point of dying on a shameful cross in order to present us, his enemies, as righteous into His kingdom. Cf. Romans 5, Philippians 2.

### Application for us from these verses:

1. We should stand in for other believers when we have an opportunity to do so. If we can help reconcile two members of our body, then we should make every effort to do that. Encouragement, counseling, money, whatever it takes – this is Christlike.

Then in verses 21 and 22, Paul tells Philemon that he is hoping to come soon, and will be able to verify Philemon's obedience to this request. In Colossians 2:1 we learn that Paul had never been to the church in Colossae, but he looked forward to visiting after being released from prison.

**21Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say.**

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

So, Paul says, "Philemon, I know you are going to do the right thing, I'm confident of that. And even more than I asked. But I want to let you know that I'll be coming around soon, so get ready." Also, to add even more to this, he says that he expects to be released by the means of Philemon praying for him! So "Philemon, be praying for my release, and that release means I'll be coming your way." Now you know that he can't pray for Paul to be released without doing the very thing which Paul is

requesting from him, especially if Paul will be coming to see how the church in Colossae is doing. But what does the 'even more' in verse 21 mean? It is not a call for emancipation, as some suggest. It may be a call to allow Onesimus to minister alongside Philemon, as he has with Paul. It may be that Philemon would send Onesimus back to minister with Paul again. It may be even a greater forgiveness and welcome than Paul is requesting. Possibly Philemon has others that have wronged him that he can forgive graciously, thereby doing even more. We don't know exactly, but Paul is confident that Philemon will act in accordance with his love for God and his fellow man.

Finally, Paul relates rather subtly how he has had to deal with this himself, and that Philemon is not alone in needing to forgive, but rather that this is part and parcel with what being a believer is all about.

**23Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends greetings to you, 24and so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke, my fellow workers.**

## **25The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.**

Paul's farewell is interesting because of a couple of names listed here. Epaphras, we've talked about. Luke is a frequent companion of Paul, and Aristarchus had shared in Paul's ministry in Ephesus, had traveled with him through Greece, Rome, and Jerusalem, and had shared Paul's imprisonment. The other two are interesting. Mark is the same Mark who is the cousin of Barnabas, who defected during the first missionary journey of Paul. That led to a falling out between Paul and Barnabas. But by this time, Paul and Mark have been reconciled – this surely would have been significant to Philemon – knowing that the apostle Paul had to wrestle with similar emotions and come to terms with forgiveness in 'the real world' as it were.

Demas is listed here and in Colossians as someone who is with the rest of them, no doubt helping in some capacity. But by the time Paul writes his second letter to Timothy, Demas has abandoned the faith and deserted Paul, and is described as being 'in love with this present world.' **“And we**

**know that for anyone who loves the world, the love of the father is not in him”** – I Jn 2:15. Also James says that **“friendship with the world is enmity or hostility with God.”** James 4:4. At the time of the writing of Philemon, Demas would still have seemed to be a faithful brother, so this lesson is perhaps for us. Paul would still be dealing with issues of forgiveness right up to the end of his life, with those who were closest to him. If he dealt with this, we will also.

### Application for us from these verses:

1. God places people in our lives that will give us an opportunity to forgive. Don't forget – you are one of these people to other people! We have the privilege of forgiving others and showing the character of Christ – and we have the reminder of our brokenness by needing others to forgive us.

I want to close with a story that many of you have probably heard, and it displays forgiveness in a powerful way. It was written by Corrie Ten Boom, a

Christian, and a Dutch prisoner in a concentration camp during WWII.

It was in a church in Munich that I saw him, a balding heavysset man in a gray overcoat, a brown felt hat clutched between his hands. People were filing out of the basement room where I had just spoken, moving along the rows of wooden chairs to the door at the rear.

It was 1947 and I had come from Holland to defeated Germany with the message that God forgives.

It was the truth they needed most to hear in that bitter, bombed-out land, and I gave them my favorite mental picture. Maybe because the sea is never far from a Hollander's mind, I liked to think that that's where forgiven sins were thrown.

"When we confess our sins," I said, "God casts them into the deepest ocean, gone forever."

The solemn faces stared back at me, not quite daring to believe. There were never questions after a talk in Germany in 1947. People stood up in

silence, in silence collected their wraps, in silence left the room.

And that's when I saw him, working his way forward against the others. One moment I saw the overcoat and the brown hat; the next, a blue uniform and a visored cap with its skull and crossbones.

It came back with a rush: the huge room with its harsh overhead lights, the pathetic pile of dresses and shoes in the center of the floor, the shame of walking naked past this man. I could see my sister's frail form ahead of me, ribs sharp beneath the parchment skin. Betsie, how thin you were!

Betsie and I had been arrested for concealing Jews in our home during the Nazi occupation of Holland; this man had been a guard at Ravensbrück concentration camp where we were sent.

Now he was in front of me, hand thrust out: "A fine message, *fräulein!* How good it is to know that, as you say, all our sins are at the bottom of the sea!"

And I, who had spoken so glibly of forgiveness, fumbled in my pocketbook rather than take that

hand. He would not remember me, of course—how could he remember one prisoner among those thousands of women?

But I remembered him and the leather crop swinging from his belt. It was the first time since my release that I had been face to face with one of my captors and my blood seemed to freeze.

“You mentioned Ravensbrück in your talk,” he was saying. “I was a guard in there.” No, he did not remember me.

“But since that time,” he went on, “I have become a Christian. I know that God has forgiven me for the cruel things I did there, but I would like to hear it from your lips as well. *Fräulein*”—again the hand came out—“will you forgive me?”

And I stood there—I whose sins had every day to be forgiven—and could not. Betsie had died in that place—could he erase her slow terrible death simply for the asking?

It could not have been many seconds that he stood there, hand held out, but to me it seemed hours as I

wrestled with the most difficult thing I had ever had to do.

For I had to do it—I knew that. The message that God forgives has a prior condition: that we forgive those who have injured us. “If you do not forgive men their trespasses,” Jesus says, “neither will your Father in heaven forgive your trespasses.”

I knew it not only as a commandment of God, but as a daily experience. Since the end of the war I had had a home in Holland for victims of Nazi brutality.

Those who were able to forgive their former enemies were able also to return to the outside world and rebuild their lives, no matter what the physical scars. Those who nursed their bitterness remained invalids. It was as simple and as horrible as that.

And still I stood there with the coldness clutching my heart. But forgiveness is not an emotion—I knew that too. Forgiveness is an act of the will, and the will can function regardless of the temperature of the heart.

“Jesus, help me!” I prayed silently. “I can lift my hand. I can do that much. You supply the feeling.”

And so woodenly, mechanically, I thrust my hand into the one stretched out to me. And as I did, an incredible thing took place. The current started in my shoulder, raced down my arm, sprang into our joined hands. And then this healing warmth seemed to flood my whole being, bringing tears to my eyes.

“I forgive you, brother!” I cried. “With all my heart!”

For a long moment we grasped each other’s hands, the former guard and the former prisoner. I had never known God’s love so intensely as I did then.

Do you have someone you need to forgive? Are you in need of forgiveness from someone else? Don’t let your fellowship with God and His body wait any longer to make things right. Surely since we have been forgiven so much, that to forgive, though hard to do, is what God expects. And when we submit in this area, He provides the grace necessary to carry it through, and the true peace that follows.