

A Postcard from Prison

Part 2 Philemon 8-25

The fellowship of brotherly love most powerfully glorifies Christ when it reconciles estranged Christians.

LTS: Matt. 18:21-35

Last week we began a rather short study on the very brief letter of Paul to a man named Philemon. This epistle of Paul is unlike any other of his writings. What makes it significantly different is the fact that it's a personal letter.

- He is NOT writing to correct error in a church.
- He's NOT writing to teach doctrine.
- He is not drawing us upward toward the the supremacy of Christ, or the call to discipleship, or every-member-ministry.
- He's not commanding submission to authority or thwarting false teachers.
- No, this letter of Paul is a personal epistle of an apostle to one of his dear friends. The only other place in the N.T. where we find a personal letter like this in John's third epistle.

I don't want to rehearse the whole story behind this letter of Philemon. We've done that a couple times already in the past three weeks. Suffice it to say that Philemon, a faithful and Godly man, had a runaway slave who apparently stole something from him while making his bid for freedom. Through a providential encounter with Paul in Rome, the young slave, Onesimus, repents and believes in Christ. Upon learning of his sin against his master, Paul sends him home to reconcile. But he doesn't send Onesimus home alone. With him is Paul's helper, Tychicus, and this personal letter from Paul is in his hand.

Now we have already learned that this epistle is about personal reconciliation between Philemon and Onesimus. In fact, there are three people directly involved in this tale of reconciliation:

- One man has sinned.
- One man has been sinned against
- And one man is helping them to reconcile.

If you've ever felt the need to reconcile with someone you have offended or tried to help two parties reconcile, you know it's not an easy thing to do. It can be agonizing! It's difficult to swallow your own pride and confess your sin to the person you offended (no matter how small your contribution to the problem may be). Nevertheless, confession, forgiveness, and reconciliation are clear mandates from God in the Scriptures. Let's take a moment to think through this.

Why should Christian people forgive?

A. Because we were created to show the world what God is like:

1. Ephesians 5:1-2

“Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. ² And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.”

2. Matthew 26:27–28

“And when He had taken a cup and given thanks, He gave it to them, saying, “Drink from it, all of you; ²⁸ for this is My blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for forgiveness of sins.”

- Beloved, This is the blazing center of the gospel, that Jesus poured out His blood so we could have forgiveness. We exist to show the world what Christ is like and what His gospel is like.

B. We must forgive because we remember how much we have been forgiven:

1. Ephesians 4:31-32

“Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice.³² Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.”

2. Colossians 3:12-13

“Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, ¹³ bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also MUST forgive.”

C. Because we are warned of the consequences of not forgiving:

1. Matthew 6:12-16

“and forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. ¹³ And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil. ¹⁴ For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, ¹⁵ but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

2. James 2:12-13

So speak and so act as those who are to be judged under the law of liberty. ¹³ For judgment is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment.

3. Matthew 18:32-35

Then his master summoned him and said to him, ‘You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. ³³ And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?’ ³⁴ And in anger his master delivered him to the jailers, until he should pay all his debt. ³⁵ So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart.”

All of this is true, but that doesn’t make reconciliation much easier. Every time we either confess sin or forgive sin it always involves sacrifice. If you are the sinner, your pride will have to be sacrificed. If you were sinned against, justice will be sacrificed. You will actually cancel the debt that person genuinely owes to you, and you will do it (as Jesus says) from the heart.

Now as we come to the epistle of Philemon, we need to understand that both Paul and Philemon knew these truths. They both know how much God had forgiven them. They also know what it means to forgive one who has sinned against them. I say we must assume this knowledge because Paul makes no attempt to rehearse or explain any of the biblical teaching on the subject. But that’s what Paul is after. Rather than explaining the doctrine of forgiveness, the entire letter is Paul’s appeal to Philemon to do it!

- Do the hard thing, Philemon! It is not going to be easy! It is going to be awkward and uncomfortable but do it anyway!
- Do it for the glory of Christ!
- Do it for the health of the church!
- Do it do it for the good of your ministry!
- Do it for your own spiritual health!
- Do it as a personal favor to Paul.
- But by all means, do it! Forgive and reconcile.

Church family, I have been in leadership in this church for more than 26 years and I can tell you one of the most grievous and damaging things to friendships, marriages, church-plants and homes is a failure to forgive.

The only thing that is its equal in terms of damage caused is a failure to ask forgiveness when you have sinned. Listen, there is a reason we are commanded to not allow the sun go down on our anger. It gives the devil a foot-hold; an opportunity to wreak havoc and cause great harm and destruction.

Are there sins that you have failed to confess to someone you’ve sinned against? Has someone asked for forgiveness and you have been unwilling to forgive from the heart? Its time. The Lord is telling you right now, it’s time.

Now assuming that both Paul and Philemon understanding the bible's teaching on forgiveness, let's stand together and read the appeals Paul makes to Philemon to forgive.

Read Philemon 9-25

Accordingly, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do what is required, ⁹ yet for love's sake I prefer to appeal to you—I, Paul, an old man and now a prisoner also for Christ Jesus— ¹⁰ I appeal to you for my child, Onesimus, 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.)

¹² I am sending him back to you, sending my very heart. ¹³ 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, ¹⁴ but I preferred to do nothing without your consent in order that your goodness might not be by compulsion but of your own accord.

¹⁵ For this perhaps is why he was parted from you for a while, that you might have him back forever, ¹⁶ 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. ¹⁷ So if you consider me your partner, receive him as you would receive me.

¹⁸ If he has wronged you at all, or owes you anything, charge that to my account. ¹⁹ I, Paul, write this with my own hand: I will repay it—to say nothing of your owing me even your own self. ²⁰ Yes, brother, I want some benefit from you in the Lord. Refresh my heart in Christ. ²¹

Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say. ²² 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.

²³ Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends greetings to you, ²⁴ and so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke, my fellow workers. ²⁵ The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.

May the Lord add his blessing to the reading...

The message I want you to hear this morning is this:

The fellowship of brotherly love most powerfully glorifies Christ when it reconciles estranged Christians.

In verses 1-7 Paul emphasizes the many godly qualities evident in Philemon's life. But along the way Paul hints that something big is coming. He prays (6) that Philemon's active faith will move him to radical love when he sees his run-away slave and reads this letter from Paul. What does Paul want him to do? He tells us (17) "Receive him as you would receive me." Paul is confident he will respond well. Nevertheless, he offers Philemon a veritable avalanche of reasons why he should. These, I think, can be neatly categorized as

- Personal Reasons to forgive and
- Practical Reasons to forgive

I. Personal Reasons for Forgive:

1. On the grounds of Paul's love for Philemon.

A. Read v. 8-9

Accordingly, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do what is required,⁹ yet for love's sake I prefer to appeal to you—I, Paul, an old man and now a prisoner also for Christ Jesus—

- B. Sometimes when we approach a person about their sin, we make it harder for them to repent that is should be. If you go in making demands or accusations – even quoting Scriptural commands – it can have a hardening effect. But Paul comes in softly and gently.
- C. He could have used his authority as an apostle of Christ to demand it, but no. Out of love for Philemon he speaks gently and shows deference to his brother. He's approaching him not out of law but out of love.
- D. Then in verse 19 Paul says, "to say nothing of your owing me even your own self." I take that to mean that Paul was the one who brought Philemon into new life in Christ. that often results in a deep, life-long friendship.

2. On the grounds of His own hardships:

A. Read 9b. "I, Paul, an old man and now a prisoner also for Christ Jesus."

- B. It's as if Paul is saying, "I know that forgiving Onesimus is going to be a hardship, but that's the experience of the normal Christian life. We do hard things and we suffer for

Christ's sake.

- C. As Deitrick Bonhoeffer famously said in his book *The Cost of Discipleship* "When Jesus calls a man, he bids him come and die."¹
- D. Paul is old and 24 hours a day he is chained to a Roman guard. If Paul can be faithful in those conditions, Philemon can be faithful in his. He can do all things through Christ who strengthens him.

3. On the grounds of Paul's Personal attachment to Onesimus

A. Read v. 10

"I appeal to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I became in my imprisonment."

- B. These are some of the most tender words Paul ever penned in the N.T. And this is how we know that Paul led Onesimus to Christ while under house arrest.
- C. Paul is saying, as far as I am concerned, the young man humbly standing before you is my son. Treat him as if this boy were your best friend's child.
- D. Again (12) "I am sending him back to you, sending my very heart
- E. We should note here that (10) is the first mention of Onesimus. Paul writes nearly half the letter before he even mentions to Philemon the object of his concern. Everything previous to verse 10 is designed to soften his heart toward the difficult request Paul is about to lay on him. And Paul is determined to do it with an abundance of grace.

4. On the grounds Philemon's Goodness.

A. Read v. 14

...but I preferred to do nothing without your consent in order that your goodness might not be by compulsion but of your own accord.

- B. Verses 3-7 are a testament to Philemon's goodness. Paul wanted this decision to be made by the right person and with the right motivation.

5. On the grounds of Their friendship.

A. Read v. 17

"So if you consider me your partner, receive him as you would receive me."

- B. In other words, treat him as if the one coming to you to confess sin were actually me rather than him.
- C. When someone approaches you for forgiveness will you treat him/her as if their friendship is one that you really want to keep? Or are you willing to trash the relationship

¹ Deitrick Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*.

and have nothing to do with the offending party?

These are Paul's Personal Reasons for asking Philemon to forgive and reconcile.

II. Practical Reasons for Forgiveness:

1. On the Grounds of his Newfound Usefulness

A. Read v. 11

(Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful to you and to me.)

B. This is interesting because the name Onesimus means "Useful" This is clearly a play on words. This run-away slave was useless to Philemon but now (in Christ) "*Mr. Useless*" is useful to you and to me.

C. And actually, this may be the only place in the N.T. where the same play on words is evident in both languages. In Greek Useless is A-christos while Useful is Eu-christos. I know that's not earth-shattering, but its kind of fun to discover.

D. The point is, now that Onesimus is a lover of Christ and is back home where he belongs. if Philemon receives him back as Paul suggests, he will be very useful in life and in ministry.

E. The most significant thing point to be made here, however, is that Onesimus has experience real change. He is not the young man he used to be! The gospel changes a man!

F. And BTW, I read last week that historically, in decades decades that followed these event, that there was an aged brother who was known as the Bishop (or elder) of Ephesus. Can you guess his name? Onesimus. No one know for sure if it was the same man, but wouldn't that be just like God to take a useless slave and make him one of the most respected pastors in Asia-Minor?

2. On the grounds of his Proven Gospel

Faithfulness

A. Read v. 13. Paul says...

"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."

B. I take this to mean that Onesimus became a faithful co-laborer with Paul in gospel ministry. What an asset a man like that would be to the ministry of the church that met in Philemon's house!

C. Paul returns to the theme of Usefulness to Philemon when he speculates that (15)

"This Perhaps is why he was parted from you for a while, that you might have him

back forever.”

D. Paul sees the invisible hand of providence working through all these affairs for the good Philemon. Isn't that a wonderful thought? For those who love God, He causes all things to work together for God (Rom. 8:28)

3. On the grounds of Full Restitution:

A. Read v. 18-19

Paul promises, “If he has wronged you at all, or owes you anything, charge that to my account. ¹⁹ I, Paul, write this with my own hand: I will repay it.

B. Paul understood that true repentance requires restitution. If you defraud anyone, it must be paid back and restored. And it's not likely that Onesimus would have been able to do this. So Paul offered to pay the debt in his place.

C. For Paul it would be a small price to pay to see these brothers restored. So he says (20) “Yes brother, I want some benefit from you in the Lord. Refresh my heart in Christ? How could Philemon refresh Paul's heart. Verse 20 tells us: “That you might have him back forever, no longer as a bondservant but more than a bondservant, as a beloved brother.”

Finally, Paul concludes (v. 21-25) by saying,

Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say. ²² 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. ²³ Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends greetings to you, ²⁴ and so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke, my fellow workers. ²⁵ The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.

III. Conclusion:

1. Isn't this little letter a precious gift from the Lord? And it's a gift that keeps on giving. Because you see, there's more.

2. When we look carefully at this letter from a bird's eye view you can, you can see very clearly a picture of the gospel. Consider this:

A. Onesimus was born in slavery

B. Moreover, he became a transgressor when he took what didn't belong to him and tried to hide.

C. The penalty for a thieving runaway was death

D. By his transgression he incurred a debt he could never pay.

- E. But Paul stepped between Onesimus and his master to appease his righteous indignation and pay off his debt.
- F. The result was that Onesimus was transformed from being a slave to a precious son; and Fully reconciled to his master.

The picture is clear, isn't it?

- A. We all were born in slavery to sin
- B. Sin became personal when we took what God forbade and then tried to hide our sin behind the foolish fig leaves of self-righteousness
- C. The wages of our sin is death
- D. We owed God a debt we could never repay
- E. But Jesus stepped between sinful you and the righteous wrath of God. He is the only mediator between God and man; our only hope of salvation.
- F. On the cross he paid our debt and satisfied the demands of God's holy wrath against sin.
- G. Those who repent and believe in Jesus are transformed from slaves of sin to sons and daughters of God.
- H. If God did all of that to forgive us, don't you think we should forgive and reconcile with one another?

The fellowship of brotherly love most powerfully glorifies Christ when it reconciles estranged Christians to one another.