

Forgiveness and Reconciliation

The Actions of One Who Forgives

Philemon 8-18

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The Actions of One Who Forgives

Scripture

Two weeks ago I started a short series of sermons called “Forgiveness and Reconciliation” from Paul’s letter to Philemon.

Part of the reason I am preaching this series is because I want to learn how, when I sin (and I do sin all the time), to repent well, and to seek forgiveness from and reconciliation with those against whom I have sinned. I fail in many of my relationships, and I want to learn how the gospel enables me to repent, seek forgiveness, and achieve reconciliation with those whom I have hurt.

Philemon was a wealthy, godly Christian who lived in the city of Colossae. He had a slave named Onesimus. Some conflict arose between them, although we don’t know the nature of the conflict. Onesimus fled from Philemon, perhaps stealing money from him in the process, and went to Rome. While in Rome Onesimus met Paul, who was in prison. Paul shared the gospel with Onesimus, who became a Christian. He served Paul very well, but Paul knew that Onesimus had to return to Philemon. Paul wrote a personal letter to Philemon asking him to forgive Onesimus and to be reconciled to him.

Last week we examined the character of one who forgives. Today, I would like to look at the actions of one who forgives.

So, let’s read the entire letter of Paul to Philemon, although my text for today is verses 8-18:

¹ Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother,
To Philemon our beloved fellow worker ² and Apphia our
sister and Archippus our fellow soldier, and the church in your
house:

³ Grace 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. 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, 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 slave but more than a slave, as a beloved brother—especially to me, but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord.

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.

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.

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. (Philemon 8-18)

Introduction

Dr. Billy Graham once said, “Perhaps the most glorious word in the English language is ‘forgiveness.’ ”¹ Christians who have experienced the forgiveness of God know how wonderful it is to have our debt of sin paid by Jesus Christ and to be reconciled with a holy God. And when we receive the forgiveness of others, we are reconciled with them and the relationship is restored.

Interestingly, while Paul’s letter to Philemon is about forgiveness, the word “forgiveness” does not appear in the letter. Nevertheless, Paul implicitly asked Philemon to forgive Onesimus and to be reconciled to him. Paul based his request on love, as he said in verses 8-10, **“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.”**

Paul did not articulate in his letter to Philemon any reasons why Christians must be forgiving people. However, it would be helpful for us to note several reasons why Christians must forgive. I am using John MacArthur for the material for this message.²

A. Failure to Forgive Breaks God’s Law

First, Christians must forgive because failure to forgive breaks God’s Law.

The Sixth Commandment states, “You shall not murder” (Exodus 20:13). However, in The Sermon on the Mount, when Jesus explained the Sixth Commandment not to commit murder,

¹ John Blanchard, *The Complete Gathered Gold* (Webster, NY: Evangelical Press, 2006), 217.

² John F. MacArthur Jr., *Philemon*, MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody Press, 1992), 215–223.

he showed that a violation of God's commandment includes anger, insult, and inappropriate words. Jesus said in Matthew 5:21-22, "You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.' But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, 'You fool!' will be liable to the hell of fire." Anger is kept alive by an unforgiving spirit, and breaks God's Law.

B. Failure to Forgive Denies That God Has Forgiven Us

Second, Christians must forgive because failure to forgive denies that God has forgiven us.

After King David sinned against Bathsheba (by committing adultery with her) and her husband Uriah (by having him murdered), and came to the point of repentance, he said in Psalm 51:4, "Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so that you may be justified in your words and blameless in your judgment." Although David had sinned against Bathsheba and Uriah, his greater sin was against God, which is by far more serious. However, if God forgives us of our sin, we must also forgive those who sin against us. If we do not forgive the sin of others, then we do not understand the gravity of the sin that God has forgiven us, and we practically deny that God has forgiven us.

C. Failure to Forgive Leads to a Breach of Fellowship

Third, Christians must forgive because failure to forgive leads to a breach of fellowship.

Jesus said in Matthew 6:14-15, "For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses." If we do not forgive others when they

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seek our forgiveness, it will hinder our fellowship with God.

Similarly, if we do not forgive others when they seek our forgiveness, it will hinder our fellowship with each other. In Jesus' Parable of the Unforgiving Servant a man who had an enormous debt forgiven by his master did not forgive another man with a relatively small debt against him. The other servants were outraged by the unforgiving servant's behavior and reported him to the master (Matthew 18:21-35). J. Philip Arthur comments, "Deny a broken and repentant brother the forgiveness he seeks, and you will disappoint and exasperate other Christians who learn of your refusal to relent."³

D. Failure to Forgive Usurps the Authority of God

Fourth, Christians must forgive because failure to forgive usurps the authority of God.

The Apostle Paul wrote to the Romans in Romans 12:19, "Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.'" C. S. Lewis said, "If God forgives us, we must forgive others. Otherwise it is almost like setting up ourselves as a higher tribunal than him."⁴ If we do not forgive others, we are saying that we know better than God about how to administer justice.

E. Failure to Forgive Hinders Worship

Fifth, Christians must forgive because failure to forgive hinders worship.

Jesus said in Matthew 5:23-24, "So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go. First

³ J. Philip Arthur, *Christ All-Sufficient: Colossians and Philemon Simply Explained*, Welwyn Commentary Series (Darlington, England: Evangelical Press, 2007), 226–227.

⁴ John Blanchard, *The Complete Gathered Gold*, 219.

be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.” I like Arthur’s comment on this verse, “After all, we worship a pardoning God. To come before him withholding pardon demonstrates that, in one area at least, we do not aspire to be like him.”⁵

F. Failure to Forgive Does Not Follow the Example of Jesus

And sixth, Christians must forgive because failure to forgive does not follow the example of Jesus.

Jesus forgave people who sought forgiveness. But he also forgave people who did not even seek his forgiveness. When he was hanging on the cross, he said in Luke 23:34, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” John MacArthur comments, “Though the relationship will never be restored until the offending person desires forgiveness, still we are not to hold a grudge, but forgive from the heart and be free from any bitterness – showing only love and mercy.”⁶

It seems that Paul believed that Philemon understood the reasons why Christians must forgive each other. So, he did not state the reasons. He moved into the body of his letter by describing the actions of who forgives.

Lesson

In today’s lesson, let us examine the actions of one who forgives.

Let’s use the following outline:

1. Forgiveness Involves Reception (10-14)
2. Forgiveness Involves Restoration (15-16)
3. Forgiveness Involves Restitution (17-18)

⁵ J. Philip Arthur, *Christ All-Sufficient: Colossians and Philemon Simply Explained*, 227.

⁶ John F. MacArthur Jr., *Philemon*, 219.

I. Forgiveness Involves Reception (10-14)

First, forgiveness involves reception.

Receiving a person back into a relationship is part of what is involved in forgiveness. Onesimus returned to Philemon asking for forgiveness and wanting to be received back into a relationship with Philemon. Actually, there were three things that were true of Onesimus that showed that his request for forgiveness was real.

First, Onesimus was repentant. Paul said in verse 10, **“I appeal to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I became in my imprisonment.”** Paul shared the gospel with Onesimus. And like every true Christian, Onesimus responded to the gospel in faith and repentance. And he further demonstrated his genuine repentance because he had returned to his master Philemon. So, when Philemon read Paul’s letter, Onesimus was standing before him, a sign that he was truly sorry for the sin he had committed against his master Philemon.

Second, Onesimus was transformed. Philemon did not get back the same man who had run away from him. Paul said in verse 11, **“Formerly he [i.e., Onesimus] was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful to you and to me.”** Actually, in the Greek Paul employed a play on words because the name “Onesimus” was a common name for slaves, and it meant “useful,” which was what slave masters hoped their slaves would be. In essence, Paul said in verse 11, “Formerly Useful was useless to you, but now Useful is indeed useful to you and to me.” Paul knew that Onesimus was transformed, and he knew that Philemon would soon learn that too.

And third, Onesimus was faithful. He was so faithful that he had deeply impressed himself on Paul. In fact, Paul said in verse 12, **“I am sending him back to you, sending my very heart.”** Paul had come to love Onesimus deeply, and he knew that Philemon

would too. The reason for Paul's affection for Onesimus was because of his faithful service to him. So, he said to Philemon in verses 13-14, **"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."**

And so because Onesimus was repentant, transformed, and faithful, Paul knew that Philemon would forgive him and receive him back into a relationship with himself.

So, first, forgiveness involves reception.

II. Forgiveness Involves Restoration (15-16)

Second, forgiveness involves restoration.

Paul noted the providence of God in verse 15, **"For this perhaps is why he was parted from you for a while, that you might have him back forever."** God sovereignly overruled Onesimus' sin when he ran away from Philemon, and possibly also stole from Philemon. Philemon certainly suffered the loss of Onesimus' work while he was gone. But in all of that God was overruling sin in order that good might result (cf. Romans 8:28). God's grace is mightier than sin and failure.

Paul went on to say that Onesimus was returning **"no longer as a slave but more than a slave, as a beloved brother—especially to me, but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord"** (16). Paul did not ask Philemon to free Onesimus from slavery. However, he urged Philemon to receive him as **more than a slave, as a beloved brother** in the Lord Jesus Christ. Onesimus was already a beloved brother in the Lord Jesus Christ to Paul, and now he wanted Philemon to restore Onesimus to that relationship with himself.

So, first, forgiveness involves reception. Second, forgiveness

involves restoration.

III. Forgiveness Involves Restitution (17-18)

And third, forgiveness involves restitution.

Paul finally gets to his request from Philemon in verse 17, **“So if you consider me your partner, receive him as you would receive me.”** Paul wanted Philemon to receive Onesimus as if he had received the Apostle Paul himself.

However, Onesimus had wronged Philemon by running away from him. He may also have stolen money from Philemon. And Philemon may have had to purchase another slave to replace Onesimus.

The Bible clearly teaches that restitution needs to take place when someone suffers a loss because of our sin. Numbers 5:6-7, **“Speak to the people of Israel, when a man or woman commits any of the sins that people commit by breaking faith with the Lord, and that person realizes his guilt, he shall confess his sin that he has committed. And he shall make full restitution for his wrong, adding a fifth to it and giving it to him to whom he did the wrong.”**

John MacArthur notes, **“Restitution is an essential component of forgiveness, and it would have been right for Philemon to demand it of Onesimus. It is not wrong, however, to be gracious.”**⁷ It would have been wonderfully gracious of Philemon to cancel the debt altogether. But Paul did not want to put that kind of pressure on Philemon. So, he told Philemon that he would pay the debt when he said in verse 18, **“If he has wronged you at all, or owes you anything, charge that to my account.”** By offering to make restitution for Onesimus, Paul made it easier of Philemon to complete the reconciliation between himself and Onesimus.

John MacArthur makes the following insightful comment:

⁷ John F. MacArthur Jr., *Philemon*, 223.

Paul's willingness to meet Onesimus' debt to restore his relationship with Philemon is a marvelous picture of Christ's work. Philemon, like God, had been wronged. Onesimus, like the sinner, stood in need of reconciliation. Paul offered to pay the price to bring about that reconciliation. That is the same role Jesus plays in the relationship between the sinner and God. Paul, like Christ, was willing to pay the price of reconciliation.

Never are we more like God than when we forgive. Never are we more like Christ than when we pay someone else's debt so that reconciliation can take place. Paul's willingness to suffer the temporal consequences of Onesimus' sin mirrors Christ's willingness to suffer the eternal consequences of our sin.⁸

So, first, forgiveness involves reception. Second, forgiveness involves restoration. And third, forgiveness involves restitution.

Conclusion

Therefore, having analyzed the actions of one who forgives, we should ask God to enable us to forgive others and to be reconciled with them.

A well-known pastor once said, "The mark of community – true biblical unity – is not the absence of conflict but the presence of a reconciling spirit."⁹

It takes two people to reconcile. The person who has committed sin needs to demonstrate repentance, transformation, and faithfulness. In other words, there must be a genuine change and desire to put things right with the person who has been wronged.

And the person who forgives will receive, restore, and, if necessary, receive restitution in order to be reconciled to the offender.

May God help each one of us to have a reconciling spirit. Amen.

⁸ John F. MacArthur Jr., *Philemon*, 223.

⁹ See <http://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/1996/november/2088.html>.

Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and membership in his church family,
develop them to Christlike maturity,
equip them for their ministry in the church
and life mission in the world,
in order to magnify God's name.*

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PRAYER:

Our Father, thank you for the Apostle Paul's letter to Philemon.

Lord, when we sin against one another, may we repent of our sin. Grant us transformation and faithfulness so that our repentance may be seen to be truly genuine.

And when we have been sinned against, help us to demonstrate to a watching world the actions of one who forgives. Help us to receive, restore, and, if necessary, receive restitution in order to be reconciled to the offender.

And if there are those here today who do not yet profess faith in Jesus, will you enable them to repent of their sin and believe in Jesus so that you can extend your forgiveness to them.

And for all of this I pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

BENEDICTION:

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and always. Amen.

CHARGE:

Now, brothers and sisters, go and serve God wholeheartedly!