

AUGUST 15th and 16th
FORGIVENESS BECAUSE OF THE CROSS

“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.”

PHILEMON 8-12

“The job of guiding the nation to a fairer future fell to two remarkable Americans, an unexpected pair. One was White, born impoverished on a frontier farm, the other Black, a child of slavery who had risked his life escaping to freedom in the North. Without fancy pedigrees, neither had had an easy path to influence. No one would have expected them to become friends—or to change the country... Sharing little more than the conviction that slavery was evil, the two men’s paths converged, and they would ultimately succeed where the Founders fell short.” The words describe Abraham Lincoln and Frederick Douglass and are written by Brian Kilmeade in his book, “The President and the Freedom Fighter: Abraham Lincoln, Frederick Douglass, and Their Battle to Save America’s Soul.” Kilmeade does well to describe a relationship that was built on honesty and respect, even when they vehemently disagreed with each other. They both desired freedom for slaves, but the route to that goal was often cluttered with differing opinions. Indeed, even after Lincoln’s assassination, Douglass was pivotal in giving Lincoln credit for the abolishment of slavery and mourned the fact that freed slaves would not be able to be helped on other issues by Lincoln going forward.

Why bring up Frederick Douglass and Abraham Lincoln? Because they dealt with emotional issues that they had to work through for the glory of God...the emancipation of the slaves. Many interpreters believe that Paul’s letter to Philemon is one that addresses a runaway slave. While Paul doesn’t come out directly and state this, it appears as you read that Onesimus has escaped and that’s why Paul is writing back to Philemon. Unfortunately, commentators are correct that this personal letter from Paul (his shortest in the Bible) is similar to joining a movie after it’s already started thirty minutes ago and leaving twenty minutes before it ends. We can’t be absolutely sure that Onesimus ran away, and we don’t know what Philemon did with Paul’s letter when he received it. So what do we do as men when we read this cloudy letter?

Even as Philemon doesn’t address the slavery issue like we’d like, we do see what God is doing here. Paul is writing as someone who has great spiritual influence over both Philemon and Onesimus. He writes Philemon to accept Onesimus back. Even further, his call is to forgive Onesimus, taking him back not as a slave, but as a brother in the Lord. Indeed, Paul puts himself out here in this letter. Any wrong that Onesimus has done, Paul will pay it from his personal account. The theme from this personal letter from Paul to his brother in the Lord is one of forgiveness and compassion. Colossians and Philemon are often grouped together, so it makes sense to refer to what Paul says in Colossians 3:12-13: “Put on then, as God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, 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.” The direction of forgiving complaints and bearing with one another overrides our historical distance from the New Testament. Sure, we don’t have slaves anymore and we drive cars, but last time I checked, we still struggle to forgive and bear with others. Indeed, as men we can be driven in our competitive world to critique, grumble, and hold grudges against someone that has wronged us. When we are wounded, we want to strike back. But God. God calls us to forgive as He has forgiven us. We must shut our mouths and see how much God has forgiven us at the cross. If God forgives us when we were still

sinner, we must also forgive and treat others as brothers and sisters in the Lord. Men, how will you follow God's call to forgive?

Spend some time thinking about ways that you struggle to bear with others and forgive. Ask the Lord to give you more grace to forgive as He's forgiven you.

For Further Reading: Colossians 3:1-25