

“The Features of Forgiveness”

Philemon 8-18

Theme: An unforgiving spirit is as ungodly as a forgiving spirit is godly.

Refer to Ephesians 4:32 and speak of our forgiveness in Christ.

I. The Basis of Forgiveness - Repentance – vv. 8-14

A. The Experience of Repentance – vv. 8-9

1. After praising God for the genuine faith in Philemon, demonstrated through the features of faith listed in vv. 4-7, Paul now expresses his confidence in Philemon to continue to display the outcomes of a genuine relationship with Jesus - *“Therefore, though I have enough confidence in Christ to order you to do what is proper, yet for love’s sake I rather appeal to you ...”*
2. Paul’s point is that both he and Philemon have experienced the work of God in their lives to prompt them to do what is right – they’ve both known repentance in their own lives.
3. Paul has tenaciously clung to what is proper throughout his long life – *“... since I am such a persona as Paul, the aged”* [πρεσβύτης] – or perhaps “an elder” – and speaks of the fact that he is 60-65 and has had a long record of obedience to his calling.
4. Additionally, he did what was right even though it meant personal loss or threat of life – *“... and now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus.”*
5. Through his own experiences, he identifies what was also true of Philemon in his surrender to the Lordship of Jesus.

B. The Evidence of Repentance – vv. 10-14

1. Now Paul declares that they are not alone in their surrender to Christ – Onesimus also has the same faith – *“I appeal to you for my child Onesimus, whom I have begotten in my imprisonment.”*
2. Even as Paul had been involved in the repentance and conversion of Philemon, the free man, he was involved in the conversion of Onesimus, the slave.
 - a) *Again, we have yet to get specific details of what happened, but we know he had turned to Paul and believed.*
 - b) *Perhaps Onesimus had heard the Gospel when he had attended to Philemon while a slave and recalled the*

message preached by Paul.

- c) When he came to the end of himself, he might have sought Paul out in Rome as during this first imprisonment; Paul was under house arrest – cp. **Acts 28:16**.
 - d) Onesimus may have come to one of the assemblies at the house where Paul was under guard and heard the Gospel again and repented.
3. The reality of his repentance is evident even as Paul described him with irony using his name (“**Onesimus**” means “useful”) – “... **who formerly was useless to you, but now is useful both to you and to me.**”
 4. Onesimus had been faithfully serving Paul and had become a transformed man who would return to Philemon with a heart to obey him as to the Lord – cp. **Colossians 3:22**.
 5. Additionally, his repentance was confirmed by his willingness to come back to Philemon in Colossae, knowing the consequences he may have to face – “**I have sent him back to you in person, that is, sending my very heart ...**”
 6. His point is that Onesimus’ willingness to come demonstrates that he has the same heart as both Paul and Philemon possess – one that seeks the will of God in doing what is right.
 7. In the same way that Paul would have viewed Onesimus’ ministry to him as a credit to Philemon, he desires to allow Philemon to determine how he could best minister to Paul – “... **whom I wished to keep with me so that on your behalf he might minister to me in my imprisonment for the gospel; but without your consent I did not want to do anything, so that your goodness would not be, in effect, by compulsion but of your own free will.**”
 8. Paul’s message is that the best way to minister to him was to receive Onesimus back with open arms and as more than merely a slave, something he specifically requests in v. 16.

II. The Beauty of Forgiveness - Restoration – vv. 15-16

A. The Exercise of Providence – v. 15

1. Paul then reminds Philemon that the Lord allows things for His reasons –far above our purview – “**For perhaps he was for this reason separated from you for a while, that you would have him back forever.**”
2. Essentially, Paul appeals to the sovereign hand of God in our lives

that whereas men can intend evil through their deeds, God wants to use it for good – cp. *Genesis 50:20*.

3. When you consider the priority of eternal values over temporal, Philemon knew temporal sacrifice but was able to realize eternal gain through the redemption of Onesimus.

B. The Enhancement of Relationship – v. 16

1. He desires that the new relationship between Philemon and Onesimus would be far superior to whatever the relationships had been before: “... *no longer as a slave, but more than a slave, a beloved brother ...*”
2. Paul does not call here for the emancipation of Onesimus, but rather, the elevation of respect for Onesimus as far more than a slave but as “*a beloved brother.*”
3. If, because of the bonds in Christ, Onesimus was “beloved” to Paul, having both the returned slave and a new brother would elevate his importance to Philemon – “... *but how much more to you ...*”
4. This elevates Onesimus above mere property and dignifies him as a man of equal importance to Christ as any other believer, many of whom Philemon had helped.
5. There are now two aspects of Philemon’s relationship with Onesimus whereby he is doubly blessed – “... *both in the flesh and in the Lord.*”

III. The Blessing of Forgiveness - Restitution – vv. 17-18

A. The Restitution of Position

1. Paul states that he desires the reception Philemon gives to Onesimus to be to see him as valuable to Paul himself – “*If then you regard me a partner, accept him as you would me.*”
2. He wants Philemon to restore Onesimus to work together on something far more glorious than menial service but seeking fellowship and partnership for Christ's glory.

B. The Restitution of Property

1. This does not mean that a person being forgiven should think it unnecessary to make what they did right – they cannot expect forgiveness without a cost – cp. *Leviticus 6:4-5*.
2. Paul tells Philemon, “*But if he has wronged you in any way or owes*

you anything, charge that to my account.”

3. Paul isn't expecting Philemon to acquit Onesimus from guilt because he has been saved; Onesimus still must face whatever consequences would be appropriate.
4. Paul demonstrates his love for both Philemon, who should be reimbursed, and Onesimus, who owes the restitution, by stating that Paul will pay for it – v. 19.
5. This is a beautiful picture of Christ, who paid the price for our sins so that the Father might be just and the justifier of sinners.