

Philemon, A Case Study on Forgiveness
A Call to Forgive
Philemon 1:1-14

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HDBC

Letter writing is almost a lost art. We'd rather pick up the phone or click off a text message. In Paul's day it was all about letter-writing. There is no way to know how many letters Paul wrote, probably hundreds. We know of 13 that were divinely inspired as part of God's Word.

Philemon is, without a doubt, the least known of those letters. **It consists of only 300 words** but what a gem it is! It was written from Rome, where Paul was held under house arrest for his faith and work in the Gospel. Though experiencing some freedom to live in his own rented house, he was chained to a roman soldier throughout the day and night. It was under those circumstances that he wrote this letter.

Every book in the N.T. has a purpose, a story that prompted the author to take up his pen. This is certainly true in this letter. General themes include let me tell you the general themes of the letter. Responsibility, reconciliation, and most importantly, forgiveness. But it has a twist.

The letter involves a third-party seeking forgiveness and reconciliation among two brothers in Christ. I've been there as a pastor. We tend to hurt each other. Most of the time the hurt is unintentional, yet real. At other times we may act in selfishness and hurt someone else on purpose. We've all been on both sides of that equation. It's why the Bible has much to say about forgiveness.

I'm convinced that unforgiveness is one of the greatest problems in the church. It quenches the Spirit, destroys trust, diminishes joy, and kills fellowship. It is one of Satan's favorite weapons and he has perfected his use of it. ***Forgive*** is not used in the letter, but It is the central theme.

Read Philemon 1:1-14

1. A Delicate Situation

We've all experienced situations or circumstances we would describe as delicate, tricky, or awkward. You know the kind I'm referring to. The kind that must be addressed, but that could backfire if not handled in the right way or not received in the right way. This is one of those.

Philemon was a wealthy Christian who lived in Colossae and who had been converted through Paul's preaching. He had a wife named Apphia and a son named Archippus, and they had slaves in their household. One was a man named Onesimus.

It seems clear from the letter that Onesimus robbed his master, Philemon, and escaped from slavery. Colossae was not a large town and a fugitive from justice could not stay there and remain undetected. Where better to hide out and disappear from official view than in the capital city of Rome, which would always have large numbers of foreigners within its walls.

Yet, in the providence of God, he came into contact with Paul, the very man who had led his master to Christ. Not surprisingly, Onesimus also heard the gospel from Paul and became a Christian. **Truth is often more interesting than fiction.**

In the course of their time together Paul was made aware of Onesimus' past. Most likely it was the conviction of the Holy Spirit on Onesimus after he was saved.

Now, this was a tricky situation, indeed. Paul had a deep and long relationship with Philemon, who had been wronged by Onesimus. But he now has a deep and devoted relationship with Onesimus. What would he do? How would he manage this situation?

2. A Biblical Solution (10-14)

Paul would appeal to Philemon to forgive his former slave and receive him back as a brother in Christ. This is the purpose for the letter. Next week we will get into more of the details. But for now, just understand **this is a request by Paul for Philemon to forgive a man who has greatly harmed him.** Paul loves both of these men and wants there to be perfect and complete reconciliation. This would require **a great act of forgiveness for one and a great step of faith and courage for the other.**

Note the affectionate way that he speaks of him. ***I appeal to you for my child, Onesimus, whom I have begotten in my imprisonment.*** The affectionate reference to Onesimus as **my child** is typical of the warm bond of love, which existed between Paul and his converts.

Christianity is best viewed in the context of relationships. One of the hallmarks of our faith is the relationships which are forged between fellow-believers. That is especially true between those saved and those who led them to salvation.

The New Testament likens our relationships with each other as that of the various **members of the human body.** If one member of the body suffers, then all suffer. Not only is it important that individual members be functioning well, but that they be functioning in unity.

Paul's consuming passion was to win people for Christ, to make men whole, rescuing them from sin and restoring them to a right relationship with God. Once restored and made right with God, he desired to lead them into spiritual maturity as they learned to live out their new faith.

He has brought Onesimus to Christ and now he has a problem. What should he do about Philemon? What does he tell Onesimus? His salvation has wonderfully and eternally changed his relationship with God. But it has not changed the broken relationship with Philemon. For

Paul the idea of leaving this brokenness unaddressed was unthinkable. And so, he wrote this letter to Philemon and made his case for forgiveness and reconciliation between the two who were now brothers.

3. A Textbook Approach (1-7)

Paul offers a great primer on how to approach a fellow believer and ask them to choose the highroad of forgiveness. **Paul could have simply demanded that Philemon do the right thing.** He says as much. Instead, he laid a wonderful foundation before making the appeal. When you find yourself trying to navigate a delicate situation, by suggesting a Biblical solution, how you approach the other person is critical. Paul offers a wonderful case study in how to do so. There are four elements.

- 1) Affirms their ongoing human relationships. (1-2)
- 2) Pronounces a spiritual blessing. (3)
- 3) Points to a history of prayerful support. (4-6)
 - a. He has prayed for them by name on a regular basis. (4)
 - b. He prays for their success in ministry. (6)
- 4) Offers positive affirmation and encouragement. (4-7)
 - 1) He is thankful for him. (4)
 - 2) He has heard of his love and faith. (5)
 - 3) He expresses confidence in him. (6)
 - 4) He has watched him refresh others (7)

4. Closing Thoughts

We're going to come back to this short letter next week. We'll dive deeper into some other details and get a fuller picture of this **case study on forgiveness**. But for now, let me wrap up.

Forgiveness is an ongoing theme throughout the Bible.

John MacArthur points out that there are no less than seventy-five different word pictures about forgiveness in the Bible. They bring clarity and understanding when it comes to the importance, nature and effects of forgiveness. He lists some in his commentary on Philemon.

To forgive is . . .

To turn the key, open the cell door, and let the prisoner free.

To write in large letters across a debt, “Nothing owed.”

To pound the gavel in a courtroom and declare, “Not guilty!”

To shoot an arrow so high and so far that it can never be found again.

To bundle up all the garbage and trash and dispose of it, leaving the house clean and fresh.

To loosen the moorings of a ship and release it to the open sea.

To grant a full pardon to a condemned criminal.

To relax a stranglehold on a wrestling opponent.

To sandblast a wall of graffiti, leaving it looking like new.

To forgive is to smash a clay pot into a thousand pieces so it can never be pieced together again.

Forgiveness is so important that the Holy Spirit devoted an entire book of the Bible to it. The book of Philemon offers a real-life situation involving real people. May we take seriously the call to forgive, even as we have been forgiven.

The forgiveness of God toward us is what enables us to have a changed heart. Only God can do that for us. But once He has done so, there is an expectation that our changed hearts will lead us to extend to others the same forgiveness that God has given to us.

Who have you not forgiven? Don’t dismiss this question too quickly. Ponder it and pray about it. Ask the Lord to show you. Then take steps.