

Philemon, A Case Study on Forgiveness

The Appeal

Philemon 1:1-25

May 11, 2025

HDBC

This morning we return to one of the shortest books in the Bible. It is not **the** shortest. That would be **Third John**. It is not the second shortest. That would be **Second John**. It is the third shortest. It is the book of **Philemon** and was one of thirteen letters written by the apostle Paul that are included in the New Testament. Most were written to churches. A handful were written to individuals. This is one of those.

Written by Paul during his first Roman imprisonment.

Written to Philemon, who lived in Colossae.

It was Paul's attempt to broker a reconciliation between 2 believers.

Onesimus was a slave owned by **Philemon**. Both men ultimately became believers in Jesus through the ministry of Paul. But they were saved at separate times and separate places and completely independent of each other. **Sometime before either were saved, Onesimus escaped** from slavery and made his way to Rome. It was there that he met Paul and was saved. Both men were now believers in Jesus and brothers in Christ. Yet their past lives and past actions **continued to perpetuate the divide that had begun before they were saved**. Paul's hope and intent was that they be reconciled. This would require **humility, forgiveness and courage**.

Before we get into the text, I think it will be helpful to offer some clarifying statements concerning the slavery of the 1st century Rome. When you read of slavery in the Bible or you hear me mention that slavery it would be natural for you to think the kind of slavery that existed in America and Great Britain in the 18th and 19th centuries. In that context it would make little sense to expect a runaway slave who had found his freedom to feel compelled to seek the forgiveness of his master.

So, let me offer some statements that might help.

1) Slavery in 1st century Rome was not like the slavery in 18th and 19th century America. Some similarities, but many differences. Here are some characteristics of Roman Empire slavery

- a. Slavery was accepted as normative. It was not questioned.
- b. Slavery was not race-based. Had nothing to do with skin-color.
- c. Most were captured in war or descendants of slaves.
- d. As much as one third of the population were slaves.
- e. Considered the property of their masters. Had no legal rights.
- f. Had opportunities for education and training in almost any field.
- g. Many slaves were given the opportunity to purchase freedom.

2) This is not an endorsement of the practice of slavery.

The primary goal of NT Christians was not to reform the culture but to share the gospel. They understood that transformed individuals could and would ultimately transform the culture, at least to a degree.

3) The gospel breaks down the barriers erected in a broken world.

One of those barriers that separated people was slavery. Slaves and masters lived on different sides of this cultural fence. When two people are saved that fence needed to be removed, as far as possible. The tearing down of that fence would begin with attitudes and perspectives toward one another. Philemon was no longer to see Onesimus as his slave but as his brother.

4) Paul was dealing with a real-life situation, not addressing the moral value of slavery.

The immediate concern was how each believer was to be Christ-like in the situation in which they found themselves.

Read a quote from N.T. scholar, Donald Guthrie.

This letter brings into vivid focus the whole problem of slavery in the church. There is no thought of denunciation even in principle. The apostle

deals with the situation as it then exists. He takes it for granted that Philemon has a claim of ownership on Onesimus and leaves the position unchallenged. Yet in one significant phrase Paul transforms the character of the master-slave relationship.

Onesimus is returning no longer as a slave but as a beloved brother. It is clearly incongruous for a Christian master to “own” a brother in Christ. And although the existing order of society could not be immediately changed by Christianity without a political revolution (which was clearly contrary to Christian principles), the Christian master-slave relationship was so transformed from within that it was bound to lead ultimately to the abolition of the system.

Now, with that long introduction, let's take a look at the text. This morning I want to walk through it under **three headings**.

1. The Relationships (1-10)

Understanding the relationships is critical.

Philemon and Onesimus – Master/Slave. Master/Fugitive slave.

Philemon and Paul – Paul led Philemon to Christ. Spiritual mentor.

Onesimus and Paul – Paul led Onesimus to Christ. Spiritual mentor.

Philemon and Onesimus – Brothers in Christ who were living in a broken relationship with each other. Paul realized they could not leave their broken fellowship unresolved.

2. The Situation (11-14)

Keep in mind that this letter was delivered to Philemon by Onesimus.

There it would be important for Paul to explain the situation. (10-14)

I'll paraphrase Paul's explanation in four statements:

Onesimus has become a believer in Jesus.

He's been an incredible blessing to me, in my imprisonment.

I've sent him back to you. But with him, I'm sending my heart.

I would love to have kept him here, not without your consent.

Paul was acknowledging the cultural situation of slavery and was seeking to operate within it, as long as it did not violate God's word or His will. Paul was sending him back because it was the right thing to do. This is why Onesimus is standing at your door.

3. The Appeal (15-25)

Simply put . . . *Accept him as you would me.* Recognize that the previous relationship you had with Onesimus is no longer important. It's time to move forward in a new relationship and a new future. Let go of the past and embrace the new reality of who you both are. Don't let the past actions or circumstances rob you of the joy of the new relationship God wants you to have with each other.

He then offers some compelling reasons for Philemon to respond favorably. **These are motivating factors.** There are seven. Again, I'll paraphrase what Paul is communicating to Philemon.

- 1) Onesimus was useless but now is useful.
- 2) *This is part of a master plan orchestrated by God.*
- 3) You are now brothers in Christ. This is what brothers do.
- 4) *Your relationship with me. Treat him just like you would me.*
- 5) I will pay his debts.
- 6) *It will bless me.*
- 7) I believe you will do the right thing, and more.

This letter is a case study in forgiveness and reconciliation.

It is a call to do the right thing, in the right way.

It is a prime example of why we seek forgiveness and why we forgive.

Some Takeaways:

- 1) **Unforgiveness is destructive.** *Reject the temptation to embrace it.*
Those who refuse to forgive live with ongoing negative effects.

a. It keeps you living in the past.

When you refuse to forgive you stay imprisoned to the hurt and pain you have experienced. Forgiveness allows you to move forward and away from the experience that caused pain. Doesn't mean you forget, but you know longer reside in that experience.

b. It produces bitterness

Bitterness is not just a sin; it is an infection. It causes the original hurt to grow, spread and take root. It allows it to become entrenched. Bitterness replaces warmth with cold, it replaces soft edges with hard ones. It replaces sweet speech with cutting speech.

c. It opens the door for Satan

Eph. 4:26-27. *Be angry, and yet do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and **do not give the devil an opportunity.***

Much of the ground Satan gains in our lives is due to unforgiveness.

d. It hinders our fellowship with God

Jesus declared, *If you forgive men for their transgressions, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men, then your Father will not forgive you.* This is not a statement about losing our salvation but about losing our fellowship with God.

2) Seeking forgiveness is risky. *Seek it anyway.*

It was risky for Onesimus to return to Philemon. **Roman law** imposed no limits to the power of the master over his slave. The life or death of Onesimus rested totally with Philemon. Slaves were routinely crucified for lesser offenses. Runaway slaves could be branded with an "F" for **fugitivus** on their heads.

But the risk was worth it for Onesimus. He was now a believer in Jesus. The Holy Spirit was compelling him to make things right with his master. So, he had to return.

The Christian life was never intended to be risk-free. In fact our relationship with Christ often brings us into greater risk than before. Too many believers run scared when there is the slightest risk.

It's risky for a young man to stand and **preach his first sermon**.

It's risky for you to **teach your first class**.

It's risky for you to **go on a mission trip**.

It's risky for you to **share your testimony**.

3) Offering forgiveness is humbling. *Offer it anyway.*

Philemon would need to set aside his pride, his feelings and his perceived personal rights. He would have to **think not like citizen of Rome but a citizen of the Kingdom of God**. He would need to think not about his rights but about his love for a brother in Christ. And he would have to remember just how much forgiveness God has offered to him.

4) Forgiveness is an essential step for reconciliation. *Take the step.*

Without forgiveness, reconciliation is almost impossible. These former allies had become brothers. In order to experience their new relationships, forgiveness would have to be offered.

In a dream, Martin Luther found himself being attacked by Satan. The devil unrolled a long scroll containing a list of Luther's sins, and held it before him. On reaching the end of the scroll Luther asked the devil, "Is that all?" "No," came the reply, and a second scroll was thrust in front of him. Then, after a second came a third.

But now the devil had no more. "You've forgotten something," Luther exclaimed triumphantly. "Quickly write on each of them, 'The blood of Jesus Christ God's son cleanses us from all sins.'"

The foundation for our forgiveness of others is Christ's forgiveness of us. And, as Satan has no grounds to accuse us, our forgiveness of others must leave no grounds for us to come back and accuse them.