

## Philemon 3 What Can You Forgive?

A sermon delivered at Calvary Chapel DC Metro  
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We've been looking lately at a letter written from the Apostle Paul to a man called Philemon. It's one of what we've called the Little Letters to Normal People in our Bibles.

Philemon, along with 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> John are short, single chapter, "books" of the Bible written to normal people about things going on in their lives, but as we have been learning, their short length doesn't take anything away from their powerful impact – these little letters convey some important truths.

So far we've made two very important observations from Philemon. First, we've seen that coming to Christ often costs us something – Saul the celebrated Pharisee, the young up and comer in the Jewish religion system gave up everything in order to follow Christ; he counted his former accomplishments and pedigree as worthless compared to what he received in his new identity in Christ, so that now, as he opens his letter to Philemon, he writes "[Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus.](#)" Spiritually speaking, Christ had captured him, and that led eventually to his physical arrest as well – so we learned that following Christ often costs us something.

But, the very next words Paul writes are "[and Timothy our brother.](#)" Which is worth noting because Timothy isn't a biological or even a stepbrother of either Paul or Philemon – he's their brother in Christ. And through this we've seen that although following Christ has a cost, we also gain fraternity and community among the church and Christians here on earth on top of forgiveness and blessing from God.

The Great Commandment was to love God and love others and the Gospel makes both possible.

So now that we have established these two principles – of the cost of Christ and also the reward, we're going to spend the next two weeks applying them to the lives of two very different men bound together in one very complex dilemma: Onesimus, a runaway slave and Philemon his master.

Their relationship, and Onesimus' escape, is the reason for Paul writing this letter – he wants everyone involved to see how their Christian faith should govern their reaction to an ethically complex situation. Let's read it together so we have a clear understanding of what is going on:

[1 Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy \*our\* brother,](#)

To Philemon our beloved *friend* and fellow laborer, 2 to the beloved Apphia, (probably his wife) Archippus our fellow soldier, (either their son or their pastor, there's a difference of opinion among scholars,) and to the church in your house:

Before we move on, I want to make sure you notice the inclusive language used here. Timothy is 'our brother.' Philemon is "our beloved friend and fellow laborer." Archippus is "our fellow soldier." And, there's a church of some size being addressed here as well. Once again you see that when you receive Christ as your savior, you receive God as your Father, and the church as your family. There is inclusion, there's a place for you, and it all starts with the work of Christ. So:

3 Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

4 I thank my God, making mention of you always in my prayers, 5 hearing of your love and faith which you have toward the Lord Jesus and toward all the saints, 6 that the sharing of your faith may become effective by the acknowledgment of every good thing which is in you in Christ Jesus.

7 For we have great joy and consolation in your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed by you, brother.

Apparently, Philemon has quite a reputation as a man of God – he's kind, generous, and open about his faith. So, who is he?

Well, the name Philemon is a Greek name, a Gentile name –most likely he's not a Jew. Most people suspect he is a fairly well off businessman who accepted Christ during Paul's preaching in Ephesus. And we can tell by the contents of this short letter that his conversion had a real impact on his life and the lives of other around him. Think about some of the things that Paul has just said.

First of all, Philemon has a reputation for "refreshing the hearts of the saints." We don't know all the ways he did that – but the point I want to make is this: Philemon saw opportunities to good and he took them. He made outsiders feel like insiders by offering to help. That's huge.

We all need help finding our way through this life. Whether it's the building you're working in, the system you're using, or the thing you're trying to sign your kids up for – we all know that experience of feeling a little lost and to have someone smile and say, can I help you? – or to know someone who knows how to navigate things, it's encouraging isn't it? It's 'refreshing.'

But, you know, that plays out in the big picture of life as well. We get bumped and bruised and rushed and hurried and fried by the pace and events of this life and this city and it's good to be able to walk into church and go, "ahhh, home." Or to walk through the door for home group, plop down on the couch and feel like 'this is a safe place where I can rest and escape from the craziness for a minute.'

We want this church to feel that way – we want this to be a safe place for sheep – a home away from home – a place where you feel safe and encouraged and where to quote Paul, your heart can be refreshed – and if for any reason, any one or any thing ever threatens that or makes you feel uneasy – would you please let me or Matt know? We want you, the saints, to be “refreshed” by our times together.

But getting back to Philemon, Paul says he also had “love and faith toward Jesus and toward the church.” So, there’s an internal AND an external component to his faith – what God has done on the inside is obvious to everyone else on the outside. He’s bearing fruit. It’s a love that’s not just felt, but it’s expressed and he’s expressing it in one of the greatest ways possible – by opening up his home for ministry.

Paul even addresses the ‘[the church that meets in your home.](#)’ I don’t know if you know this, but the church met in homes or in rented or public spaces exclusively for the first 2-300 years of its existence. For as much as we think of a church as a building, it’s really the people that make up the church – no matter where they meet.

The church that met in Philemon’s house may have been pastored by Archippus and was probably connected to the church in nearby Colossae. It’s kind of interesting, isn’t it, that all three of these Little Letters to Normal People are written to people who were using their homes as centers of ministry – whether hosting missionaries or churches, they were using what God had given to them for the sake of others. That’s an important example for us all to consider.

Of course, you can only open your home for ministry if you actually have one and fortunately most of us do – we have some form of residence and that’s good.

We’ve spoken about what it was like for someone like Paul to lose everything in coming to Christ, and I’ve given you examples of others, even some in our church who have followed a similar path – some of them have given up careers and homes and cars and friends and family, and followed God’s calling into full time ministry. But many of you, most of you in fact, are *not* called to do something like that.

You’re called to do something that is, arguably, harder. You’re called to stay here, to go to work, to keep the house and use everything that God has allowed you stewardship over for His glory.

You’re called to join the ranks of people like Philemon, and Gaius, and the ‘elect lady’ John wrote to and Lydia from Philippi in the book of Acts who opened up her home for a church to meet in. Think of Mary and Martha and their brother Lazarus and the role they played in the life of Jesus – opening their home to Him on numerous occasions – taking Him in and opening the doors for ministry.

Some of you are doing it right now, or you have in the past – you know the difficulties, the extra work that goes into cleaning and preparing, the money that goes into hosting, but you

just keep opening your doors anyway out of love for God and love for His people – you see it as a ministry, and it is. God has given you a place to share and you do.

God is going to call some people to give up everything, or lose everything, in following Him. But most of us are going to stay and be stewards. Some of you will even be asked to steward over great quantities of resources – you will be people like Philemon, people especially gifted with material wealth that God wants you to use as means of “refreshing” others. God even calls some people to be the ones to make million dollar investments or fund massive projects – people that have buildings and campuses named after them.

When I was going to school at a Christian University, I saw buildings with people’s names on them – names of large donors and at first I was critical, I thought, “Well, there goes your reward! Whatever happened to not letting your right hand know what your left was doing.” And that’s one way to see things, I’ll grant you. But one day I understood things a little differently – as I was walking past a large building with someone’s name emblazoned on it, God said: ‘now you know what they did with all that money.’ They didn’t keep it for themselves, they used it for others.

Have you noticed: it’s easy to be spiritual when you have nothing. It’s hard to be spiritual when you actually have something to give – you see, in that sense following God costs all of us something, it’s just a question of how much does He want to give you and when and where does He want to use it?

So, Philemon is doing well in a lot of ways – he’s using his possessions, his position, his prayers, and his paycheck to make a difference in the lives of other people; but he’s about to face a tremendous challenge. The question now is not how well can he give, but how well can he *forgive*?

Paul’s about to get to the heart of why he’s writing:

8 Therefore, though I might be very bold in Christ to command you what is fitting,  
9 yet for love’s sake I rather appeal to you—being such a one as Paul, the aged, and  
now also a prisoner of Jesus Christ— 10 I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, whom  
I have begotten while in my chains, 11 who once was unprofitable to you, but now is  
profitable to you and to me.

Philemon had been doing so well financially he actually had at least one servant – a man named Onesimus. Slavery was incredibly common in Roman times – there were over 60 million slaves throughout the empire by most estimates. Sixty million!

But it wasn’t the kind of race-based slavery we had in the 1700-1800’s in Europe and America. Slaves in the Roman era composed an enormously varied demographic whether talking in terms of race, sex, age or education – slaves could own business and earn or buy their freedom in some cases. Slaves could even own their own slaves. That’s not to say that slavery was good, but I just want to make the point that it was different from the slavery

that comes to most of our minds from American history. And we'll talk about all of that we go along.

For right now though, I want to ask you to put yourself back in the first century where slavery is legal and widespread, and put yourself in the place of a well-off Christian businessman who had a slave and that slave had run away. But while he was gone he somehow ran into your friend Paul the apostle who led him to Christ and was now sending him back to you. How do you respond?

If possible – put yourself in his shoes – appreciate things from a first century perspective and consider it from that point of view. What do you do? You, and your wife and your family, probably felt real anger when you discovered he was gone. You felt real betrayal. Maybe you were even tempted by rage.

I'm not saying this is right, but put yourself in Philemon's shoes – he had just lost real money. Some people think Philemon took some cash or valuables from the house to finance his escape, but even if he didn't take anything with him - at the very least Philemon was out the cost of a servant. The average slave laborer sold for 500 denarii – and a denarius was equivalent to a day's wages for the average laborer – so you're looking at a tremendous sum of money. But an educated or skilled slave would be priced as high as 50,000 denarii; this was for people like a teacher, an actor, or a physician (see, not what you typically think of as slaves, right?) No matter what the case – by losing Onesimus Philemon had lost a large amount of money.

Now, I think it's reasonable to assume that Philemon was familiar with Jesus' teaching on forgiveness, and he was probably trying to get over the whole event. He was probably struggling like we all do to forget the things that hurt and put them out of our minds, but suddenly, maybe just when he had come to grips with it all, the situation gets much more complex – the runaway has been found – that's one thing, but he's also become a Christian, and Paul is sending him home – the scab has been picked off and the wound is now open again.

Listen to what Paul writes:

12 I am sending him back. You therefore receive him, that is, my own heart,  
13 whom I wished to keep with me, that on your behalf he might minister to me in my chains for the gospel. 14 But without your consent I wanted to do nothing, that your good deed might not be by compulsion, as it were, but voluntary.  
15 For perhaps he departed for a while for this *purpose*, that you might receive him forever, 16 no longer as a slave but more than a slave—a beloved brother, especially to me but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord.

Now, think about this from Philemon's position - "OK - wait Paul, you want me to receive this guy back? This guy who wronged me and my family? This guy who maybe even stole from us? And you want me to receive him as 'a beloved brother?!?'"

Philemon finds himself with a major decision to make. He's holding this letter in his hand and he's staring Onesimus in the face – does it feel a little awkward? What do you do next? What do you say? If you receive him back and go home together, what do you say on the way home? Where do you start to forgive? And what is forgiveness supposed to look like? Everything just got really complicated in your life and it's time to decide – is it time to walk in the flesh, or in the Spirit?

And remember, this whole ordeal is a public event – everyone will be watching to see how Philemon responds, and, no doubt, many will have their opinions on what should be done and they'll be having their little sidebar conversations about it all.

As a Christian, Philemon could show mercy, he could decide not to punish Onesimus – to forgive and forget and to release him – that's probably what most of us are thinking he should do, right? But think about this: if he forgives and releases Onesimus will other slaves suddenly begin to profess to be Christians too so that they will be released? Will it spark a slave revolution – something the Roman Empire is VERY nervous about? Possibly.

So, what's the other option – he could simply stand by the law and have Onesimus justly punished – right? You broke this law, you deserve this punishment – it's nothing personal, it's just justice. But, if he punishes Onesimus, what does that say of his own standing in Christ where he has found forgiveness of his own sins?

It's a complex situation. What's the way out?

Fortunately, Paul has an idea. He says, transfer Onesimus' debt to me.

17 If then you count me as a partner, receive him as *you would* me. 18 But if he has wronged you or owes anything, put that on my account. 19 I, Paul, am writing with my own hand. I will repay—not to mention to you that you owe me even your own self besides. 20 Yes, brother, let me have joy from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in the Lord.

Paul says, "I'll take care of the debt. What ever damages you incurred Philemon, put it on my account."

It's a generous offer that allows justice to be served because the crime can be punished – a fee can be levied and retribution can be made, but mercy is shown because Onesimus doesn't suffer the consequences himself.

Where did Paul learn something like that – one person stepping in to pay the debt of another – redeeming them from their deserved fate?

Why, from his own experiences in Christ of course. That's what happened at the cross, right? We who have run away from God become convicted of our crime and our guilt, but then we're presented with the gospel – the good news of how we can go back to the God we've run away from.

Jesus Christ hung on the cross and God accepts it as atonement, as a payment of the fines we've accrued through sin. Justice is done as the blood of Christ calls our sin 'sin,' but then as His blood covers us, we receive God's merciful forgiveness.

The Bible says (2 Cor 5:21) *For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.*

God the Father receives us in Christ – as though we are Christ. Paul tells Philemon *receive Onesimus as you would me.*

Now, are you really with me? Did you hear that? Do you get what he's saying? Paul the apostle – worker of miracles, writer of Scripture – giant of the faith, free man, Roman citizen, educated religious scholar, says 'receive this fugitive slave as you would receive me.' It completely turns the whole situation upside down, but again, it's the perfect living example of how God views us in Christ.

Martin Luther once wrote: "Here we see how Paul lays himself out for poor Onesimus, and with all his means pleads his cause with his master, and so sets himself as if he were Onesimus, and had himself done wrong to Philemon. Even as Christ did for us with God the Father, thus also does Paul for Onesimus with Philemon. We are all his Onesimi, to my thinking."

Friends, as we'll talk more about next week – we are all Onesimus – we're all the runaway fugitives who are being taken in by Christ and shown mind-blowing mercy. But we're also all Philemon who are being asked to take in and receive those whose stand redeemed by the blood of Christ – no matter how much they've wronged us.

Now, some people want to know, why didn't Paul just come right out and denounce slavery? Why didn't Jesus do it in the Gospels? They wish it had all been more clear. But you have to understand something very important.

Christianity believes change should radiate from the inside out – it insists that the only way to change society and its morals is to change individual hearts. Laws may govern actions, but they can never control hearts. Hearts have to be changed from the inside and no legislature can ever do that. So, Christianity always speaks to the individual and his or her heart – remember, Jesus said it's not just what you do that you'll be judged for – you'll be judged for the desires and motives of your heart as well!

So, the church stood up against slavery in the 19<sup>th</sup> century led by devout men like William Wilberforce in England who brought the slave trade to an end, and against segregation in the 20<sup>th</sup> century led by men like Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. who led the American Civil Rights movement – but in both cases, the church fought with ideas and ideals and fundamental truths, not weapons.

They fought with ideas like the one Paul wrote to the Galatians:

Gal 3:26 For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. 27 For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. 28 There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. 29 And if you *are* Christ's, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.

The fact that there is only one Savior for all men speaks to a dramatic form of equality, doesn't it? There is only one God who created all men – there's equality for you. "But all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" – there's equality for you. "For God so loved *the world* that He sent His only son that *whosoever* believes on Him should not perish but have everlasting life" – there's equality for you. At root, we all stand before God stripped down naked with none of our titles or positions or accomplishments as a solitary individual soul before our Creator and we face His judgment.

The only way to endure that judgment is to have Christ stand in our place. But then, as He does that – we receive Christ as our Savior, and God as our Father – we're adopted into the body of Christ and suddenly find ourselves surrounded by Christian brothers and sisters who come from all kinds of different backgrounds because this is the only place we could find reconciliation with God.

Now, if I see the world that way – that we're all sinners in need of grace to save us from judgment, and that grace binds us together into the family of God, all of us knit together into a single body - it's kind of difficult for me to make a big deal of myself at your expense. And as that truth sinks in deeper and deeper to your soul, it begins to change the way you see the world and people in it.

So F.F. Bruce a famous pastor and theologian of the last century writes: "What the letter to Philemon does is to bring the institution into an atmosphere where it could only wilt and die. Where master and slave were united in affection as brothers in Christ, formal emancipation would be but a matter of expediency, the legal confirmation of their new relationship."

And William Barclay, another theologian notes: "If the master treats the slave as Christ would have treated him, and if the slave serves the master as he would serve Christ, then it does not matter if you call one *master* and the other *slave*; their relationship does not depend on any human classification, for they are both in Christ."

But all of this has to happen in the lives of two real men living in the real world. Onesimus has to humble himself and return – which we'll look at next week – and Philemon has to forgive, which Paul is confident he can do.

21 Having confidence in your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say. 22 But, meanwhile, also prepare a guest room for me, for I trust that through your prayers I shall be granted to you.

23 Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, greets you, 24 *as do* Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, Luke, my fellow laborers.  
25 The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ *be* with your spirit. Amen.

Friends – how much can you forgive, here, in the real world?

How much wrong can you endure and then say, “I forgive you?”

Philemon was asked to do something incredibly difficult, but he was asked to do it as a response to what Christ had already done for him.

So I want to ask you this morning – when was the last time your faith made you uncomfortable? When was the last time God asked you to do something hard? Something concrete, even public – has there been some equivalent in your life of openly receiving someone back who had done you great harm? Someone you resented, someone who wronged you?

It’s way easier to be a Christian at church than it is at home or at the office or at school, isn’t it?

Can you forgive someone who has had an affair – whether real or imagined – whether with flesh or with images or messages? Can you forgive someone who has lied? Can you forgive someone who has cut you down, or shut you out? Can you take them back and do it with joy?

Absolutely not. Unless Christ is doing a work in you.

You see, God knows what forgiveness is all about – we turned our backs on Him and He took it upon Himself to initiate reconciliation through Christ. He did the work of accomplishing our atonement on the cross and He came looking for us to bring us the message of what He had done.

He’s the Father who not only welcomes the Prodigal Son’s return, but actually runs out to meet him when he hears the son is on his way back home.

Friends – do you understand how much you’ve been forgiven in Christ? And are you showing that kind of forgiveness to others today? Our world needs to see Christians in complex and difficult situations, in real and painful circumstances proving what they believe – showing the world and ourselves that by changing hearts God also changes lives, and in greater numbers, that has the potential to change the world.

Let’s Pray.