

## **A Living Lesson on Forgiveness**

Scripture: Philemon 1-3

Code: 57-1

We are going to begin this morning a study of a brand new book in the New Testament, the book of Philemon, and I want you to turn to it. It's just very brief, one chapter, 25 verses, a lesson on forgiveness. The little book of Philemon, for those of you who are wandering around in the index of your Bible, is tucked between Titus and Hebrews.

Of all of the human qualities that make men in any sense like God, none is more divine than forgiveness. God is a God of forgiveness. In fact, in Exodus chapter 34, God identifies Himself in that way. Verse 6 says, "Then the Lord passed by in front of Him and proclaimed" – this is the Lord speaking of Himself – "The Lord, the Lord God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and truth, who keeps lovingkindness for thousands, who forgives iniquity, transgression and sin." He says, "I am the God of forgiveness, that is who I am." Solomon said, "It is a man's glory to overlook a transgression," Proverbs 19:11. Man is never more like God than when he forgives.

Now, the theme of forgiveness is, obviously, throughout the Scripture emphasized. But there are some high points where we see the forgiveness of God in bold relief. One of them, maybe the most familiar, is the story of the prodigal son from Luke 15. I'm only going to refer to it because I know you know the story well. A father who had two sons and one of the sons was weary of being in the father's house and wanted to go and live on his own and take all of his inheritance. And he did that, left the house, wasted all his substance in sin. And then when he reached the low point of life, wanted to come back and be only a servant in his father's house because being a servant in the father's house would be better than being what he had become. That son was not unlike many sons, greedy, anxious to get his hands on wealth he had not earned, so humanly foolish in the way that he spent it on fast living with those who exploited him and left him in misery when his money ran out. But slowly he came to his senses because he was dying of hunger in a pig sty that really mirrored his life. Then came the awakening. He said, "My father's servants live far better than I, and I will arise and go to my father."

It seems in the story of the prodigal son that the young man did not expect forgiveness. He only expected some kind of mild tolerance. All he wanted was the chance to say to his father, "I've been a bum and I just – I'm not worthy to be your son any longer, but could you just make me a slave? I know I forfeited ever being a son, but could I just be a slave? All I really want is a roof over my head and all I want is a little better food than pig slop." And so he started on the road back. And it is then

that Jesus teaches us how to forgive.

The father didn't even wait for the son to get there. He ran to the son when he saw him in the distance. His words were not unkind. The Bible says he fell on his neck and kissed him repeatedly. And so Jesus tells us what the heart of forgiveness is like. It is eager, not reluctant. It doesn't even wait for the sinner to arrive. In fact, when you see him coming far away, you run to meet him and you embrace him and kiss him. And when he starts to say he's sorry, you hardly listen to that, you don't even give him time to finish, you just embrace him, love him, put him in your best outfit, put a ring on his finger, get the best meat out of freezer, cook up the best meal you can put together, start the music, rejoice with your friends, and proudly invite everybody to come to the celebration of your son that has come back. That's how God forgives. That's how He wants us to forgive.

The Lord warns us also from that story of the prodigal son that such forgiveness will be unappreciated. Such forgiveness will be misunderstood. You say, "How is that?" Well, you do remember, don't you, that the son who never went anywhere didn't appreciate this at all and was angry with his father for being so forgiving. And there are a lot of sort of in-the-house children who will pout and call you a fool for such stupid forgiveness and tell you you ought to send him back to the pig sty where he belongs. But the forgiving father can only say that he loves and he will always love even the one who has no deserving for forgiveness.

From that story we learn how God forgives – eagerly, totally, lavishly. And is it any wonder on the basis of that that when Jesus taught us to pray, the best words that He could think of for us who have so great a need to be forgiven were the words "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us"? Those words really put our feet to the fire. They tell us that God's forgiveness of us is based on our forgiveness of others. James put it this way in chapter 2 verse 13: "There will be judgment without mercy for those who have not been merciful themselves." Or to take it in a positive note, the Beatitudes say, "Blessed are the merciful for they shall obtain mercy." You want mercy? Give it. You want forgiveness? Give it and forgive like God for you are never more like God than when you forgive.

Listen again to the words of Jesus in His disciples' prayer of Matthew. Matthew says it this way, "Forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors." And then he says, "For if you forgive men their transgressions, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive men, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions." You don't forgive, you don't get forgiven.

Now, when Paul was in his first Roman imprisonment, he wrote several letters, namely Ephesians, Colossians, Philippians. We call those the prison epistles because they were written from prison, an imprisonment from which Paul was later released, and then later on another imprisonment in which he'd been martyred. But the first imprisonment in Rome was the location at which point Paul wrote these well-known epistles. Particularly Ephesians and Colossians interest us because they are tied in

to this little letter of Philemon. In both Ephesians and Colossians, there is a major emphasis on the matter of forgiveness. I want to show that to you so take your Bible for just a moment and look at Ephesians chapter 4 verse 32. And here the apostle Paul says to the Ephesian believers – and, of course, this was a circular letter that went all over Asia Minor. But he says to all of them and to us, “Be kind to one another, tender hearted” – here’s the same principle – “forgiving each other just as God in Christ also has forgiven you.”

In Colossians chapter 3, this letter written to the church at Colossae and also circulated to the church at Laodicea and no doubt others, chapter 3 verse 13, he says, “We are to be bearing with one another and forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone, just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you.”

Now, if you pull all of these together, you get the very clear idea that God is a forgiving God and you are to be forgiving people. That’s basic. In fact, God has forgiven you, so you should forgive. That’s one principle. The other one is God will forgive you if you do forgive. And so, on the one hand, the Scripture says God has forgiven you; therefore, forgive, and on the other hand the Scripture says if you don’t forgive, God won’t forgive you, and you’ll have violated the relationship, the fellowship that you could enjoy with God. The Lord has forgiven all of us all of our sins and therefore, Paul says, we should forgive each other. And if we don’t, we’re going to be chastened by God. That’s plain and simple the message.

Now, this principle is given very clear perspective in Matthew 18 and I want to take you there and we’re going to do all of this to get us right into Philemon. I want to show in Matthew 18 how this principle is illustrated in a parable. And you’re familiar with it if you were in our study of Matthew. Matthew 18, Peter says to the Lord, “If somebody sins against me” – verse 21 – “and I forgive him, how many times do I do that? Seven?” The rabbi said three, so Peter thought he was being very generous. Jesus said in verse 22 of Matthew 18, “I do not say to you up to seven times but up to seventy times seven.” In other words, you forgive as many times as someone sins against you. Just keep on endlessly forgiving.

And then He tells a parable that makes the point, and it’s a parable that depicts God and the sinner. The king in the parable is God. The man who owes the big debt is the sinner. “The Kingdom of Heaven then” – verse 23 – “may be compared to a certain king” – that’s God – “who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. And when he had begun to settle them, there was brought to him one who owed him ten thousand talents.” That’s an unpayable debt, massive debt he could never pay. “Since he didn’t have the means to repay, his lord commanded him to be sold along with his wife and children and all that he had and repayment to be made.” The debt was too much to pay but if all these people were sold into slavery, at least the king could get something. The man had obviously defrauded him. Probably one of those servants who was a tax collector and who had charge over great sums of money and had defrauded the king and now had lost it all and had no means to pay.

And he said, "Well, if I can't get what I owe, I'll get what I can, so sell all of his family into slavery and at least give me that."

"The slave therefore" – verse 26 – "falling down, prostrated himself before him, saying, 'Have patience with me and I'll repay you everything.'" He had a right heart, he had a willing spirit. Even though he couldn't have done it, his intention was right. "The lord of that slave felt compassion and released him and forgave him the debt." That's God and the sinner. When the sinner comes before God and is convicted about his unpayable debt, he's convicted about his sin, and God tells him, "You have no means to pay me, you should be sent to hell, you should pay whatever you can pay even though you could never pay me what you owe me." And that's what hell is, by the way, it's spending forever paying what you could pay which never does pay the debt you fully owe because you've affronted God so greatly as one who rejected His Son.

But this king is compassionate and when he sees the man's willingness, he forgives him the debt. Now, here comes the point. "The slave went out," he'd just been forgiven, "he found his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii, one of them" – that's a hundred days' wages, not a major debt. "He seized him, began to choke him, saying, 'Pay back what you owe.'" And the people who would be listening to Jesus tell the story at this point would be absolutely outraged. "So his fellow slave fell down and began to entreat him saying, 'Have patience with me and I'll repay you.' He was unwilling, however, but went and threw him in a prison until he should pay back what he owed."

This is unthinkable. Here is a man who has been forgiven a massive debt who turns right around and won't forgive somebody a small debt. "When his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were deeply grieved and came and reported to their lord all that had happened. Then summoning him, his lord said to him, 'You wicked slave. I forgave you all that debt because you asked me. Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow slave even as I had mercy on you?' And there's that principle. You want mercy from God, you show mercy. You want forgiveness from God, you be forgiving. "And his lord, moved with anger, handed him over to the torturers until he should repay all that was owed him. So shall My heavenly Father also do to you if each of you does not forgive his brother from your heart."

Boy, what a story. What a story. That parable is so severe that there are many people who conclude that the principle Jesus teaches couldn't possibly apply to a Christian. But it does. Because the man who wouldn't forgive the slave was a forgiven man; that is, God had already forgiven him, he is a child of God. But what it tells us is that the Lord will sometimes deal very harshly with His own children who will not forgive someone else. Whom the Lord loves, He disciplines, and every son He scourges, Hebrews 12 says, and one of the reasons He disciplines and scourges us and makes life very trying and difficult is because we have an unforgiving heart towards someone. Christians, then, are to forgive. That is the principle taught in Scripture, that is the principle illustrating the character of God in the parable of the prodigal son, and that is the principle illustrated in this parable to be true of

every believer.

This is a matter, I think, not only of blessing and fellowship with God, but it's also a matter of the assurance of salvation. Thomas Watson wrote many years ago a very interesting statement. He said this: "We need not climb up into heaven to see whether our sins are forgiven. Let us look into our hearts and see if we can forgive others. If we can, we need not doubt that God has forgiven us." Thomas Adams wrote: "He who demands mercy and shows none ruins the bridge over which he himself must pass."

And so, there is a principle in Scripture and that is this: you're never more like God than when you forgive. And such forgiveness should come easy because you have been forgiven. And if you do not forgive, then you'll put yourself in a position to be chastened by God – severely. Now, the priority of forgiveness is not only given in Scripture in principle, it's not only given in Scripture in parable, but it is given in Scripture in personal terms. And it's in the book of Philemon. Let's look at it.

Here in the shortest letter of Paul's inspired writings is the major issue of forgiveness laid out, not in principle, not in parable, but in a personal case. The prodigal son, not a true story. The king and the servant, not a true story. Those were simply parables fabricated by Christ to make a point. This, a true story. Now, we're going to see the principle flesh out. Let's read the first three verses.

"Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, to Philemon our beloved brother and fellow worker and to Apphia, our sister, and to Archippus, our fellow soldier, and to the church in your house: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." Now, this is a very typical Pauline introduction. It begins with the word "Paul." Ancient letters always started with the name of the one writing, which makes a lot of sense. You get a long letter and you have to fumble through all the pages to find out who it's from. Never in ancient times, they always started with the name of the man or the woman who authored it. It signals then that this is from the apostle Paul. You can imagine that when Philemon got this letter and he saw "Paul," his adrenalin started to flow. His heart began to beat more rapidly because Paul was not only the great apostle that everybody knew about, and Paul was not only the one who had, in a sense, founded the very church at Colossae where Philemon lived, but Paul had personally led the man to Christ. And so Paul identifies himself and certainly set Philemon's heart racing.

Paul identifies himself as a prisoner of Christ Jesus. This is a note to tell us that he is in prison. It's the same place from which he wrote Philippians, Colossians, and Ephesians. This is the fourth of the prison epistles, this little letter to an individual, and the only one of those four written to an individual. And Paul says, "I am a prisoner of Jesus Christ." He never identifies himself in that way to start with in any of his other epistles. Usually he wanted to identify himself as an apostle, as having been called by God as a servant of Jesus Christ to lay down some authority on them, to emphasize his calling and emphasize his authority. He even did that, by the way, in his letters to Timothy. Even though they

were personal letters that he was writing to one individual and even his letter to Titus. In those cases, though they were personal letters like this one, he still mentions his apostleship because they had to take his authority and carry it out in the life of a church that needed correction and direction and it needed to come through them as an authoritative word from Paul.

This, however, bears no such necessity. He is not laying some authoritative message on the church; he is speaking tenderly, personally, warmly, compassionately to a friend. And it is an appeal to his heart, an appeal to his compassion, to his love, so there's no need to refer to his apostolic office or calling or authority. He says, "I am a prisoner of Christ Jesus." It's a wonderful note because it is the way you would expect Paul to react to the Romans. The Romans thought he was a prisoner of Rome. They had captured him. They had incarcerated him. He was under their authority. But from his vantage point, he was a prisoner of Jesus Christ. He was in prison because Christ put him there, not because Rome put him there. And if you ever have any questions about that, all you have to do is remind yourself of some of the things that he said while he was in prison, most namely this one at the end of Philippians: "Greet every saint in Christ Jesus, all the saints greet you, especially those of Caesar's household." The Lord had him in prison and while he was there he was evangelizing Caesar's household.

On a number of occasions in Ephesians – chapter 4 verse 1, chapter 6 verse 19 and 20, as well as Colossians chapter 4 – he refers to himself as a prisoner. But it was for preaching Christ and it was for the sake of Christ and it was by the will of Christ that he was a prisoner. And he is saying this to Philemon, and I think it's very wise because what he is really saying sort of subtly to Philemon is, "Look, Philemon, if I can do this for Christ, can you do for Him what I ask? If I can bear the harder task of being in this prison, can you do the easier task that I'm going to ask you to do, and that is to forgive?" He's very wise, Paul. He's very tactful. Because as soon as Philemon hears the word "Paul," his love begins to well up. And as soon as he reads "a prisoner of Christ Jesus," his eyes may fill with tears as he thinks about this beloved man that led him to Christ, this great apostle, bearing the pain and agony of imprisonment. And as he thinks about all that Paul has suffered to bring the gospel to people like him, it's bound to have an effect on his willingness to do what Paul asks him to do.

And then Paul throws in, "Paul a prisoner of Christ Jesus and Timothy our brother." Timothy is not a co-author. Timothy is just a present companion, a brother in Christ. Timothy had been with Paul on his third missionary journey – Acts chapter 19. He was acquainted with the believers in Colossae, probably had met Philemon, and so this would be a word from somebody that Philemon knew. But there are others with Paul that Philemon might have known. I mean, there was, as far as we can tell if we put it all together, in Rome there was Tychicus, Epaphroditus, Aristarchus, a fellow prisoner, there was Mark, there was Jesus Justus, there was Epaphras, there was Luke, and there was Demas. Why doesn't he talk about these guys? Why doesn't he make some reference to them? Well, he does at the end of the letter. But at the very beginning of the letter, he mentions Timothy; all the rest of them he mentions at the end of the letter. Why? I believe it's because Timothy is often singled out in the

introductory part of the letter because Paul knew that someday he would pass the baton of spiritual leadership primarily to the hands of Timothy, and he wanted to set Timothy in place as one who had the role of leader. And so he identified Timothy closely, very closely, with himself.

And so it is then from Paul, along with the greetings of Timothy, to Philemon. That is the man who is the head of a family in Colossae. Colossae was a small town. The church there was probably very small. And the church met in his house. So we know he was a wealthy man. Most of the people in the Roman Empire who became Christians were slaves. Some of them were freemen, that is slaves prior and now free. Few of them were wealthy, not many noble, not many mighty. And wherever you had a wealthy person that was converted, they had a house. Slaves and freemen didn't have such things. Most of the freemen lived in apartments, or single rooms, and paid a modest sum. Wealthy people owned their own homes. So here is a man of some means who has the church meeting in his house. He calls him "our beloved brother and fellow worker," and that means our dear friend, a familiar description that Paul uses both of individuals and groups, *agaptos*, the beloved one. Fellow worker, simply again a term used by Paul very many times to speak of people who worked with him. So here is a man he loved and a man who had worked alongside of him.

Now, this friendship probably developed in Ephesus – just as a note – because Paul never went to Colossae. When I said he was responsible for the founding of the church there, it was because he founded Ephesus, stayed there three years, and out of Ephesus all those other churches in Asia Minor were planted. No doubt during the time Paul was at Ephesus, this man was converted, came to know Paul in a personal way, even though he lived a little distance away in the very small town of Colossae. So they had from then on developed a friendship. And Paul now is going to put his friendship on the line, folks, he really is. This is a straightforward letter. He's going to ask Philemon to do something in the area of forgiveness that is crucial.

Further, verse 2 addresses the letter to Apphia, our sister. That, no doubt, is his wife. I think the King James says, "Apphia, our beloved." The better reading is "Apphia, our sister," our sister in Christ. And again, this is most certainly Philemon's wife and also a friend of Paul. Then he says, "And to Archippus, our fellow soldier." Most likely this is their son. Their son, Archippus, an older son and a noble Christian who had come alongside Paul in the spiritual battle somewhere, fought valiantly in that war and is commended for his spiritual life.

Over in Colossians 4:17, Archippus is mentioned again. Philemon is never mentioned anywhere else and neither is Apphia. But Archippus is mentioned there as Paul writes to the Colossian church. He says to Archippus, "Take heed to the ministry which you have received in the Lord that you may fulfill it." So this young man was in the ministry. We don't know to what to extent or in what specifics, but here was a father and a mother with a church in their house and a son who was in the ministry. He had served, no doubt, in Colossae and had served also in Laodicea, as the note at the end of the letter to the Colossians indicates. So this little family is very important in the life of Paul, and with the

issue of forgiveness at stake becomes an opportunity for Paul to make a very important point the Holy Spirit wants him to make.

The end of verse 2, “the church in your house.” Now, Paul wanted the letter read there. It was a private letter but he wanted it read so that the whole church would hold Philemon accountable for this and so that they would all learn the lesson of forgiveness and so they would all know how to treat the forgiven man.

Now, I need to note for you that when you go back in ancient times, most churches would have met in a home, if they were not meeting outdoors. Church buildings didn’t start until the third century. They were meeting in homes. This was very typical. Still, there are places in the world where churches even today still meet in homes. There’s nothing necessarily sacred about that, but church buildings didn’t really develop until about the third century. The oldest known church has been found in eastern Syria in a place called Dura-Europos and they believe it dates around 232 A.D. That would be in the third century. So at this time, before church buildings were built as such, they were meeting in homes, and here was a house church in his house.

In verse 3, we found the standard greeting. I’m not going to spend a lot of time on it. He says, “Grace to you, and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” There is the typical standard Christian greeting. Grace, the means of salvation; peace, the result of salvation. And may I also note – I can’t resist saying – that when it says “from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ,” the union of those two together would be blasphemous if Jesus were a man or an angel. Can you understand that? This must be understood as an affirmation of the deity of Jesus Christ. If Jesus were a man, to make that kind of combination would be blasphemous. If Jesus were an angel, to make that kind of combination would be blasphemous, for it is saying that grace which saves and peace which is the result of it comes as its source from God and the Lord Jesus Christ, and therefore they must be divine – both. And thus does Paul introduce his letter – the only one of his prison letters to an individual.

Now, there has been much written about the purpose of this letter. And I don’t want to spend a lot of time on it, but I want to give you a little feel for how this letter has been approached. Some think the purpose of this letter is to demonstrate the nature of Christian love, and certainly that is present here. Some suggest that the purpose is to reveal the working of God’s providence, and certainly there is that element. Some suggest it is an example of proper manners and Christian courtesy – there are no commands, there is nothing offensive, just the pleadings of love – and certainly that’s true. Some think its purpose is to give principles for the maintenance of good Christian relations. In fact, I was talking to a man recently who is writing a book on Philemon and that’s the approach he’s taking. Some suggest that the purpose of the letter is to reveal the effect of conversion on culture and society. Some believe – and many believe this – that it’s an attack on the institution of slavery and the purpose of Philemon was to tear down slavery. Well, certainly the principles of Philemon will have an effect upon the abuses of slavish relationships, no question about that.



But it must be noted, because this last one is the most popular approach, seemingly, that no place in Scripture is there any effort ever made to abolish slavery. And at no time did any prophets or preachers or teachers or apostles of the New Testament ever attack slavery. But any call to righteous living, any call to holy love, will eliminate the abuses that are any social system. In fact, quite the contrary, there are throughout the New Testament many, many texts where slavery becomes a model of Christian principle. Slavery becomes a picture, as it were, of how we are related to God as His slaves and His servants. And repeatedly, whether Ephesians 6 or Colossians 4 or 1 Timothy 6:1 and 2, or 1 Peter 2:18, slaves are told to be obedient, submissive and loyal and faithful to their masters no matter how they act, and masters are told to treat their slaves with love and equity and kindness and fairness no matter what they might do. So while nothing attacks the institution of slavery, everything in Christian principle attacks the abuses of any social system, including slavery. Slavery was so much a part of the Roman Empire, the whole society was built on it, and by the time of Christ, slavery wasn't necessarily what we think it is today. It had been modified. There had been some laws passed and in very many cases, slaves were treated very well. In fact, if you read any of the ancient literature around the time of Christ, you will find that most writers will say a man was better off a slave than he was a runaway slave, very often better off a slave than he was even a freeman, because as a slave he was assured of care and food and a place to sleep. And if he had a good and kind master, life was very prosperous for him.

Slaves by the time of Christ could be fully educated in every discipline, many of them in fact went into medical professions. Slaves could take the benefit of owning their own property and developing their own economics and their own economy. Slaves could leave their estates to their own children. So by the time of Christ, slavery had moved away from many of the earlier abuses, though those abuses still in some cases did occur, and we'll see that even in the book of James where some Christians who must have been his slaves or servants were treated in a very unkind and physically abusive way. But slavery was changing and the Christian gospel coming into that world and the Christian preachers were not about to change the focus onto a social issue from a spiritual one. You can only imagine that if Jesus and the apostles had begun to attack slavery what would have happened in the Roman Empire. Sixty million slaves revolting would have been an unbelievable situation. Society would have been thrown into such chaos and disarray and even – you can imagine that when such a rebellion would have begun, slaves would have been crushed and massacred savagely.

So there was some reason in the changing mood of the Roman Empire to see some hope for abolishing slavery, and that hope would come through changed hearts. The seeds of the end of slavery were sown in the Roman Empire by the Christian gospel and eventually slavery died, just as everywhere in the world slavery has died when the Christian gospel came. It certainly was true in America eventually. Christianity, you see, introduces a new relationship between a man and a man, a relationship in which external differences don't matter and we are one in Christ, Jew or Gentile, slave or free. There's neither Greek nor Jew, said Paul, circumcision or un-circumcision, barbarian or

Scythian, slave or free man. This does not attack the institution of slavery. In fact, it does the very opposite of that. It tells a slave to go back to his master and be the kind of slave he ought to be to a faithful and loving master. Its theme then is forgiveness. That is its message, that is its intent. The story behind the letter makes that absolutely clear. Let me read you the story, and we're going to make just a few comments on it.

Verse 4: "I thank my God always, always making mention of you in my prayers, because I hear of your love and of the faith which you have toward the Lord Jesus and toward all the saints; and I pray that the fellowship of your faith may become effective through the knowledge of every good thing which is in you for Christ's sake. For I have come to have much joy and comfort in your love because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you, brother. Therefore, though I have enough confidence in Christ to order you to do that which is proper, yet for love's sake I rather appeal to you since I am such a person as Paul the aged and now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus, I appeal to you for my child whom I have begotten in my imprisonment, Onesimus, who formerly was useless to you but now is useful both to you and to me. And I have sent him back to you in person, that is sending my very heart, whom I wish to keep with me, that in your behalf he might minister to me in my imprisonment for the gospel. But without your consent I didn't want to do anything that your goodness should not be as it were by compulsion but of your own free will. For perhaps he was for this reason parted from you for a while that you should have him back forever, 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. If then you regard me a partner, accept him as you would me, but if he has wronged you in any way or owes you anything, charge that to my account." We'll stop there.

This is an incredible story. Philemon was led to Christ by Paul. Probably during Paul's three years in Ephesus, as I said, though he lived in Colossae, he met Paul. He had a slave and the slave's name was Onesimus. And the relationship of these two people, Philemon and Onesimus, is really the context of this call to forgiveness. The story is fascinating.

Years had passed since Philemon's conversion. Paul is now a prisoner in Rome. Philemon is active in ministry in his church. He's got the church meeting in his house. He's busy serving, refreshing the brethren by his usefulness. His slave, Onesimus, not a believer, probably felt the heat of a believing family, Apphia, his wife, having been converted, and Archippus, their son. Onesimus decided that he would be better off to run away, even though his family that he was employed by was a good family, and so he ran away. As the text indicates, when he ran away he took some money. He stole from his master.

Now, slavery was changing, but it wasn't changing so much that a slave could steal, wasn't changing so much that a slave could run away. Some would tell us that in some places, the death penalty for such activity was still in place and that slave could lose his life. Others would say the punishment was a severe imprisonment or even physical corporeal punishment. Onesimus had committed by all

Roman law a crime, a felony, a major crime and had left and tried to hide. Sometimes when a slave ran away and was caught, they would put an “F,” burn an “F” into his head, “F” for *fugitivus*, fugitive. Some of them we know in history were crucified. Some were tortured. Running away was a serious offense. He ran where I suppose you would think he would run – he ran to Rome because that was the biggest city. The estimate is the population was about 870,000 at this time, and he thought he could hide himself in the underworld of Rome and try to survive. We talk about street people today. We talk about the homeless. He would be one of them. He would be living in the underground, sleeping in back alleys, holes in the ground.

One study of the sacred treasury of the Romans for the years 81 to 49 – that would be B.C. – included taxes for manumission. Manumission means the releasing of slaves. Slavery was changing so fast that people were releasing their slaves. Every time they released a slave, five percent of the value of that slave had to be paid to the government. In finding this ancient study of the years 81 to 49 and using the amount of money that is recorded in the records, the conclusion is that in that year 30-year period, 500,000 slaves were freed – just in that 30-year period. The records of Augustus Caesar show that when masters died, typically slaves were freed wholesale. If a master died, all his slaves were free. This became such a problem, you’ve got 500,000 and they all are moving toward the cities that they had been freed, you’ve got people dying and freeing all their slaves, and the number is so great that the government made a law, and in the time of Caesar Augustus the law was that when a man died, he could never free more than a certain percentage of his slaves. If he had five, he could free one; if he had ten, he could free two. Why? Because there was a glut of homeless unemployed running all over the place in the Roman Empire.

Even though slaves had gained most of the rights of freemen, even though they could be educated in all fields, even though they had better living conditions than the freemen when they stayed in the place where they were employed by their master, they had better food and better clothes, they were treated better, they were part of a family, they were used to teach the children, provide medical care for the children, they took care of the finances, they were allowed to marry, they were allowed to own property, they could develop their own life, they were allowed in every religion, still many of them ran. The dream of freedom. And they ended up in a worse situation.

Who knows what kind of mess Onesimus was in? And by the amazing providence of God – think of it. In a city of somewhere around 870,000, or nearly a million people, he ran in to the apostle Paul. Now, you’ve got to imagine that he had some personal needs, right? And maybe he knew that Paul was preaching there and he wanted to hear this man preach. Even though Paul was a prisoner, he must have had some access. Such an imprisonment. It may have taken different forms, which gave Paul not only access to his friends, which are shown having some relation to him, but even to unbelievers. Paul persuaded Onesimus to become a Christian and he was converted. His life was transformed. Not only that, he became a help to Paul. Tells us, as we noted in the text, that he became a very encouraging servant to Paul in his confinement. Maybe he cooked meals for him and brought them to

give him proper nourishment. Maybe he provided information to him. We don't know. But as much as Paul loved him and as much as Paul wanted to keep him, Paul knew there was something that had to be settled. He was a criminal, this man. And the relationship between Onesimus and Philemon was not right. And you know Philemon was still holding this bitterness against a very close friend, for Onesimus even though a slave, would have been a household slave and a very close companion. Onesimus was at fault. Philemon was a good Christian master. Philemon had been greatly wronged by Onesimus because financially he had stolen from him, and also, losing your employee like that would mean you'd have to hire someone else and you'd have to pay another price for another one.

So Paul knew he had to go back. He had to go back with an attitude of repentance and he had to go back and ask Philemon for forgiveness. And the opportunity posed itself to send him back. Why? Paul had finished Colossians and he had finished Ephesians and he was going to send them back to those two churches with a man named Tychicus. So it was just the perfect opportunity to send Philemon, his runaway slave.

In Colossians chapter 4 – just a note – “As to all my affairs,” he says, “Tychicus, our beloved brother and faithful servant and fellow bondservant in the Lord will bring you information” – then verse 9 – “and with him, Onesimus.” So he's sending Tychicus with these two letters and with Onesimus. Now, there's risk here because Philemon would have the right to punish Onesimus. But Paul decides to send him back anyway, but not without a letter, so he sends this letter. And what it basically says is you've got to forgive this guy. You've got to be willing to be merciful. You've got to treat this slave the way Christ treated you. Same principle that he put in Ephesians 4:32, Colossians 3:13: Forgive as you have been forgiven. And that's basically the background of this story.

What's going to happen when he goes back? Well, the rest of the book from verse 4 on splits into three parts. I'll just mention them. It splits into three parts. The first part, verses 4 to 7, basically deals with the spiritual character of one who forgives. That is just a thrilling message, and that's what we're going to talk about next time. The spiritual character of one who forgives – what kind of person is a forgiving person? We're going to see that in verses 4 to 7. Then the second part of the book is the spiritual action of one who forgives. First we look at the character of a forgiver and then we look at the action of a forgiver, verses 8 to 18, and then from verses 19 to 25 is the spiritual motivation of one who forgives.

Now, by the time we're done with this book – we're only going to need three messages more to finish it – you're going to know what a forgiving person is like in character, in action, and in motivation. And this is essential. We go right back to where we started, beloved, when I began this morning to say this: You are never more like God than when you forgive. And you have been forgiven and therefore, because of the forgiveness of God in Christ, you ought to forgive one another, and if you don't forgive one another, then God relationally is going to keep His distance from you and put His hand of chastening on you rather than His hand of blessing.

You ask yourself the question: Of all of the subjects that Paul could have written about, why in the world did he pick the subject of forgiveness? This is just this little isolated kind of odd, out-of-sync, obtuse, tangential little letter stuck in the middle of these great sweeping epistles to talk to one guy about forgiving one slave. Why all this fuss? Again I say because never is a believer more like God, more like Christ, than when he or she forgives because that's the nature of God and the nature of Christ, which is most wonderfully applied to us in salvation. We read throughout the New Testament – don't we? – be like Christ, be like Christ, walk like He walked, remember Jesus Christ, be ye followers of me as I am of Christ, let this mind be in you which was also in Christ. Well, what does that mean? We're to be like Christ. What does it mean to be like Christ? Well, for sure it means to be – what? – forgiving. Because that's how we know Him, as the one who forgave us all our sins.

The character of God's forgiveness is seen in the parable of the prodigal son – eager, lavish, loving forgiveness. And the severity of chastening for one who doesn't forgive is seen in the parable of the king and the servant. This is a central theme in all of Scripture.

Father, we thank You this morning that we've just been able to introduce this wonderful little book, and we do believe that in the next few weeks as we go through its truths, You're going to transform us so that we become more like Jesus Christ, who forgave us all our sins and who set the pattern for us to forgive each other. Lord, I'm sure that even as we are here this morning in this moment of prayer looking into our own hearts, we can identify someone that we need to forgive, someone who has wronged us, someone who has been unkind, unfair, someone who has made life difficult, painful, someone who has cheated us, stolen from us something precious – tangible or intangible – someone who has misrepresented us. But Lord, we need to forgive. For how could we be like You if we didn't forgive those foolish people who sin against us, even as the son sinned against his father? How can we be like You if we go out and choke a person who doesn't forgive us while we demand forgiveness from You?

Father, make us to be forgiving. As we go through this little book, may we develop the character, the action, the motivation of those who forgive. We pray in Christ's name. Amen.

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